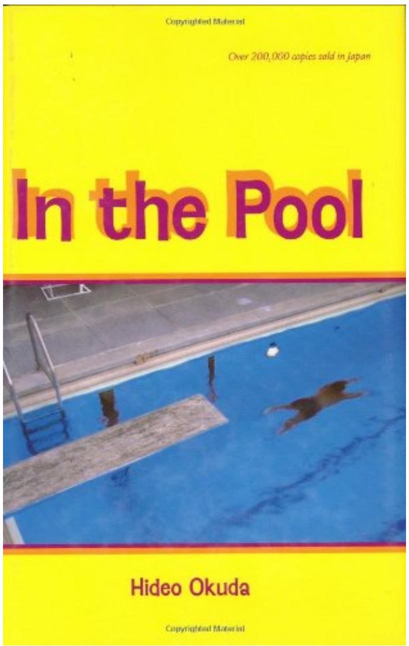

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In the Pool

Hideo Okuda

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In the Pool

Meet Dr. Ichiro Irabu. In today's Japan, a traditional land beset by modern pressures and confusion, image-conscious people just can't be seen going to a therapist. Instead they visit "doctors of neurology" like Dr. Irabu. What makes the good doctor unique is his penchant for sharing his patients' stress-related ailments, aiding and abetting their compulsions . . . and making them much worse before they get better.

In this sardonic collection by award-winning Hideo Okuda, we meet the many faces of dysfunction in modern Japan. In "In the Pool," a magazine editor's midlife crisis sends him deep into an addiction to swimming that threatens his job and his marriage. "Making a Stand" focuses on a man who, recently left by his wife, suffers a constant, painful, and embarrassing erection. In "Trade Show Model" a pretty young woman believes every man she sees on the street is a stalker. In "Cell," a high-school student addicted to his cell phone cannot stop text-messaging the "friends" he so desperately wants. "Double Check" tells of a journalist afraid to leave home, for fear his house will burn down while he's gone.

How does Dr. Irabu do it? "No, no, no. I don't do any of that fancy-pants sort of thing. . . . Some counselor listening to a patient's worries, then giving him wise words of encouragement. Perf[illegible]ly useless." His approach seems

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In the Pool

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Hideo Okuda

Translated by Giles Murray

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In the Pool

ONE

The halls were empty, and the basement level of Irabu General Hospital was pretty dead. Kazuo Omori let out a sigh as he looked up at the sign reading "NEUROLOGY DEPARTMENT." With no natural light coming in, the pale blue glow of the fluorescent lights seemed that much weaker, and the air had a chill to it. Or was that just his imagination?

Clever, the way he got rid of me like that, Kazuo thought to himself. He had come to the hospital several days in a row with a vague complaint of feeling under the weather, but the young doctor of internal medicine had been cold and distant. After his blood test yesterday, the man had even gotten sarcastic, suggesting that Kazuo try drinking Yakult. He'd still not been able to find anything wrong, despite taking an X-ray and doing a urine test, so today he had finally suggested Kazuo might want to drop into the neurology department.

"Our neurologist here is a little bit eccentric, but don't worry, you'll soon get used to him." The young doctor gave a forced smile and kept his eyes down.

Hospitals nowadays. No respect for outpatients.

He knocked timidly on the door, and a high-pitched "Hello, hello! Come right in!" rang out from inside. The voice sounded a bit like Nagashima, the Yomiuri Giants coach. Kazuo stepped into the consulting room.

The doctor looked up. He was fat, probably in his early forties, and sat sunk deep in an armchair. A young nurse with dyed brown hair sat in a corner reading a weekly magazine. She didn't even give Kazuo a glance.

"Nice to meet you, come on in," said the doctor, smiling and indicating a seat.

Kazuo sat down on a stool, and looked at the nametag on the doctor's chest. "ICHIRO IRABU, DOCTOR OF NEUROLOGY," it read. With that name, maybe he was the son of the hospital's founder, or something?

"Coffee?"

"Excuse me?"

"Coffee. Only instant, I'm afraid. Two coffees, Mayumi, my dear."

Irabu asked for the coffees without waiting for his response. The nurse—whom he'd addressed as Mayumi—said nothing, but stood up and walked grumpily out of the room, her slippers slip-slapping on the floor.

"Saw your chart," said Irabu gleefully. "Clearly psychosomatic."

"Excuse me?"

"Mental disorder. A classic case."

"Huh?" Kazuo felt a little peeved. Surely you weren't supposed to spring remarks like that on a patient who was feeling depressed enough anyway.

"Those jokers upstairs." Irabu jabbed his finger above his head toward the ground floor, where internal medicine was. "They're always so afraid it just might be a functional disorder that they don't want to send anyone down to me."

"Ah. I—uh—see."

"They want to hog all the patients for themselves."

"Hm." Kazuo wasn't sure that was likely and considered saying so, but decided that would just be asking for trouble.

It was a month ago that he had started feeling not quite right. One night he had experienced a tightness in his chest. First of all, the air had felt somehow thinner as he lay there in bed; then, a few seconds later, he was having trouble breathing. He leapt up in a panic and dashed out onto the balcony of his apartment. It only took about a minute to come under control, but he was drenched in sweat. The memory of the fear was etched in his brain.

Next up was diarrhea. Kazuo couldn't even make it from his house to the train station. He was thirty-eight years old, but he soiled himself on several occasions. He didn't tell his wife, but just changed into new underwear he picked up at a convenience store.

Predictably enough, this caused a mini-uproar. A wife can hardly be expected to stay calm when her husband is found to be wearing different underwear at night from the ones he had on in the morning. Kazuo was given the third degree, duly confessed, and cleared up any misunderstanding. But that was not the end of it. Naomi, his wife, was so sympathetic about the whole thing that she went out and bought him a box of adult diapers.

Kazuo refused to speak to her for three days.

The diarrhea lasted a whole week before the symptoms relented. But that didn't mean that his insides had quieted down. They rumbled and grumbled and were generally unsettled. It was hard for Kazuo to explain: at his first meeting with the doctor, when he complained that his "insides were like an unruly classroom full of out-of-control kids," the doctor had *laughed*.

Since yesterday, he'd had a pain deep down in the bottom of his belly. A quick skim through *The Family Doctor* and he'd guessed it was his liver. Come to think of it, recently when he peed, he had felt that he couldn't quite squeeze it all out. Whenever some new problem came up, Kazuo got nervous and distracted, so this morning he had come to the hospital yet again.

"So? Hearing voices in your head, are you? Things like that?"

Kazuo frowned.

"You know, from over here somewhere." Irabu stretched out his hand and grabbed a fistful of air. "Like you hear someone speaking, that sort of thing?"

"No." He shook his head quietly.

"Okay then, perhaps you feel that someone is watching you?"

"No." He frowned even harder and stared back at Irabu.

"Hmm, I see. So, no delusions then." He sounded rather disappointed. "Well then, I suppose it's our dear old friend: run-of-the-mill general malaise." Irabu leaned way back in his chair and rubbed his hands over his face.

The nurse brought in the coffee, and for a while they sipped it in silence. It was horribly sweet and strong. The nurse began flicking through her weekly magazine again.

"Uh . . . and what exactly is 'general malaise'?" inquired Kazuo.

"Stress-induced physical indisposition," came the crisp reply.

"So stress is the reason I had trouble breathing and got diarrhea?"

"That's right." Irabu's mouth turned up at the edges. There was something horrible about the frankness of the doctor's reply.

Kazuo tried to think if his everyday life was particularly stressful. He got on well with his wife, and he didn't have any serious problems at work either. Okay, there was some awkwardness with his sister about who should take care of their parents back in their hometown, but it wasn't serious enough for him to fret over.

"I'll tell you straight out. No, I am not going to ask," declared Irabu.

"Wha—?"

"No, no, no. I don't do any of that fancy-pants sort of thing: going into the origins of your stress and devising ways to eliminate them."

"Huh?"

"Oh come on, you know perfectly well what I mean. They're on TV all the time: some counselor listening to a patient's worries, then giving him wise words of encouragement. Perfectly useless."

"Um, is it?"

"Absolutely. Okay, so let's say I've listened to what you've got to say. Then what? For the sake of argument, we'll say you're suffering because, in your past, you killed somebody. What can I do about it? Well, I suppose I can encourage you to turn yourself in; or I could blackmail you, make you pay for my silence. That's about it, I reckon."

"Yes, but I've never done anything like that."

"You hate one of your bosses at work. Have you got the guts to poison the fellow? In your case, no, you definitely have not," Irabu continued, ignoring Kazuo. "Stress is just a part of life. To try and eliminate a thing that's part of the original package is just so much waste of effort. It's far better to switch your attention to some other object."

"By which you mean?"

Ah-ha, thought Kazuo, *there is a method to his madness.*

"By which I mean—oh—something like ambushing and beating up yakuza gangsters in the red-light district."

Kazuo frowned for a third time.

"That really gives you a buzz, believe me. Any silly little worries you might have will be blown quite away. Guaranteed. Basically, yes, it's because they'll come after you. After all, who's going to worry about trifling family or work problems when their life's in danger?"

Was the man serious? Kazuo felt a bit lightheaded.

"There is a real case of treatment like that. The patient had such an obsession for cleanliness that he refused to handle coins. Along comes the Great Hanshin Earthquake and he's one of the victims. He goes into a sort of trance, then—poof!—he gets better. You can't really arrange for an earthquake to happen, but the yakuza idea's a good middle-line to take."

"So you're suggesting I should beat up some yakuza?"

"No, no, no. It's just an example. Ha-ha-ha." Opening his mouth wide, Irabu roared with laughter. "You could also take some time off work and dash over to a war zone. That'd be good."

Kazuo sighed. Maybe it was time to leave. At least he'd learned that it was a condition caused by stress. That would tide him over till he found another hospital.

"All that I'm saying is that we don't want to flounder around looking for the causes of your stress. Even if they do manage to figure out what's causing it, the kind of people who get psychosomatic disorders aren't able to eradicate them anyway. And to top it all, Mr. Omori, you're thirty-eight years old, exactly the age when these things come to the surface. It's like measles for the middle-aged!"

He thought about asking his colleagues if they knew a hospital with a decent neurology department, and immediately thought better of it. He could imagine how quickly it would get around the office.

"Well, then, how about an injection?" Irabu gave his fat thighs a brisk slap. "You say you've got a dull pain in your liver, so today I think we'll give you a shot of antibiotics to relieve the pain."

The curtain at the back of the room slid open. Kazuo turned around and was surprised to see the nurse ready and waiting.

"Well—I was—I was thinking maybe on my next—"

"Quite out of the question. Impossible. Afraid of a needle at your age! Should be ashamed of yourself, man!"

Irabu had stood up and moved over to the doorway to show that he had no intention of letting him escape.

He didn't have much choice. Kazuo moved over and placed his left arm on the padded support. *It was true that his liver hurt. And this was a general hospital after all. They couldn't do anything too outrageous.*

He'd thought the nurse was a complete tart, but from close up she turned out to be a good-looking woman. But without a shred of amiability.

"Clench your fist, but not too tight."

She spoke as if she couldn't give a damn.

She wound a length of rubber around his upper arm and dabbed him with disinfectant.

Irabu looked on from nearby as if to keep an eye on things. *Was the girl new to the job?* Kazuo didn't care. He didn't care—just as long as they got it over with fast. He sighed softly.

Beneath the support cushion, the front of the nurse's white dress had slipped open to expose a white thigh.

Kazuo couldn't very well stare straight at it, so he turned away. It had been less than three seconds, but the nurse's thigh—its whiteness, even the marbling of the faint gray veins—was burned into his retina.

He felt a sharp prick and realized the needle had gone into his skin.

The injection safely over and done with, Kazuo was allowed to go.

"Mr. Omori, you'll pop in tomorrow, won't you?" said Irabu. "With psychosomatic diseases, it's crucial to get a checkup everyday."

"I see." Kazuo nodded unquestioningly. The afterimage of the nurse's thigh still lingered in the projection room of his brain.

"Oh, and by the way, you don't happen to be friends with any schizophrenics, do you?"

"Sorry?"

"A schizophrenic. You know, one fellow who's got several personalities all jumbled together in his head."

Why the hell should I have a friend like that? Suppressing the urge to be sarcastic, Kazuo replied with a simple, mild "no."

"What a shame. I'd like to meet one some time. In real life, there don't seem to be too many of 'em about. Ha-ha-ha." As Irabu laughed, his belly shook.

"D—Do you advise me to take things easy?"

"Nah. Doesn't much matter either way." He was picking his nose.

"So, it will be all right if I go in to work as usual, then?"

"Sure. No problem. But you shouldn't just do desk work; you need to take some exercise too." Now he was rubbing his snot onto the wall. "You have to exercise to the point that you start breathing hard at least once a day."

Kazuo looked incredulously at Irabu's physique. *The man was built like a bull. Hey, fatso!* he wanted to say. *Why don't you do some exercise yourself?*

As Kazuo emerged from the neurology department, a middle-aged nurse who happened to be passing along the corridor stared at him. He sensed something like sympathy in her eyes.

It was afternoon by the time he got to work. He made a few phone calls and tackled a few odd jobs. Kazuo worked for a publisher as part of the team that edited a monthly magazine for housewives. His section had to do loads of overtime, but since they were busy according to a regular cycle, it wasn't that difficult once you'd got used to it. They'd just sent off the final proofs, so the editorial section was pretty quiet right now.

Drinking the cup of coffee a temp had made for him, Kazuo cast an eye over his workplace. Was someone here the cause of all his stress?

The editor-in-chief was a nitpicker who fussed over expense claims like a housewife. He was annoying as a boss, but generally harmless. The deputy editor was so nervous that he'd actually been carted off one time to the hospital with an ulcer. He never even raised his voice at anyone. Kazuo's other colleagues were all mild-mannered, too. The trade-off was they were crap at their jobs. When he came to think of it, he was probably the bossiest person there.

It was something of a shock to Kazuo to realize that stress was at the root of his physical problems. He regarded himself as a thick-skinned fellow. He did his job briskly and energetically, and he'd built up an extensive network of personal contacts. He'd never thought of himself as lonely; from childhood he had always been the type to lead the group. Maybe he was just worn out? That doctor-character Irabu had said something about "measles for the middle-aged." Maybe—just maybe—he'd been right. His eating habits were irregular, and he sure wasn't getting any exercise, either.

Exercise. He crossed his arms above his head and stretched.

He hadn't really done any serious exercise since leaving college. He didn't ski and he didn't play golf. In a way, Kazuo looked down his nose at "leisure." He habitually spent his Sunday evenings watching the reports of jammed-up expressways on the TV, thinking to himself what fools people were. His wife, Naomi, said that she liked staying in too. Having no kids, they'd managed to escape being roped into group outings.

He wondered vaguely whether to try doing some exercise.

Working up a sweat was bound to feel good. Perhaps his gut—which had started to sag recently—would firm up like the old days?

As he sat on his chair, he tried rolling his shoulders. He felt a slight pain, but it wasn't unpleasant.

What should he do? Jogging would probably be easiest.

But no, there was no way he'd be able to keep it up and go jogging every day.

Tennis then? No, you needed a partner for that, and anyway, he'd never played before in his life. He had an aversion to weight training, since it made you look like you were obsessed with your own body.

He rolled his head in a circle. Unconsciously, Kazuo had ended up doing a stretch routine.

Well, how about swimming? Kazuo gave that thought the thumbs-up. He'd been a good swimmer as a child, and since swimming put no pressure on your knees or back, there was no risk of injury.

When was the last time he'd gone for a swim? He shut his eyes and cast his mind back. Not since his college days, he realized with astonishment. He hadn't been in a pool for sixteen years!

Kazuo picked up the phone from his desk and phoned his house. Naomi worked as an illustrator and was usually at home.

"Know if there's a swimming pool in our neighborhood?"

"Where the hell did that come from?" Naomi sounded suspicious.

"Look, don't make an issue of it. Just tell me if there's a pool nearby. Yes or no."

"Yeah, there's one in the basement of the local municipal gym."

"And where is this gym place?"

"Don't you know? It's next to the library. The big cream-colored building."

"Wait—where's the library?"

He felt a degree of self-contempt as he asked the question. He'd lived in the area for nearly five years but he knew next to nothing about it. Naomi seemed flabbergasted too, and wouldn't tell him anything more than that it was just five minutes' walk from their place.

"Anyway, why do you want to know?" she asked.

"Thinking about going swimming."

"Who?"

"Me."

"Trying to win the Olympic swimming medal that Japan never gets, is that it?"

"Where do you get such crazy ideas?"

"So what's it all about then?"

"Doctor's orders. Told me to get some exercise."

"You're not seriously telling me that you went to the hospital today as well, are you?" The voice at the end of the line had become strident.

"Yes, I did. I mean, it's easy to drop in on the way to work."

"You're sick!"

Nowadays his wife often said things that made no sense.

When it all started, Naomi had been properly worried about his symptoms; lately, however, she couldn't have cared less. Even when he was lying all pale on the sofa, she'd be completely indifferent, spouting wacky insider jokes like, "No shadows and no forceps showing up on the X-rays, Doc." Christ! He hadn't even had an operation, so how the hell was anyone supposed to have left a set of forceps inside him?

Worse than that was the way she'd serve up his favorite dish of boiled sea bream, even though she knew perfectly well that he'd lost his appetite. He'd end up leaving half of it uneaten, and Naomi would pull his plate over to her side of the table with undisguised glee.

Kazuo had succeeded in ascertaining that there was a pool in the neighborhood, so he briskly brought the conversation to an end. He unfolded a map of Tokyo on his desk. Examining the ward where he lived, he discovered that, sure enough, there was a municipal gym about five minutes from his place. The phone number was even listed at the edge of the map. He rang up, more out of habit as an editor than anything else. The gym was open from 9 A.M. to 9 P.M. every day and only cost two hundred yen an hour. Kazuo had already made up his mind to take up swimming.

Right, I need to go and buy myself a bathing suit. Hang on though, nobody says "bathing suit" anymore. It's got to be "swim trunks." I'll need a cap and goggles too.

Kazuo felt restless. He decided to invent an appointment and slip out of the office. Publishing was good that way: if you said you were going out to meet someone, no one got suspicious.

Three minutes later he was at a department store in Shinjuku.

Summer was around the corner, so even though it was a weekday, the swimwear section was bustling with young men and women. He'd never known that swimwear could be so flashy and colorful.

After a number of false starts, Kazuo opted for briefs rather than shorts. He bought a bag and a sports towel while he was at it.

He felt an astonishing sense of pride as he made his purchases. He wanted to brag to the shop girl, "Yes, swimming's one of my hobbies, you know."

He found himself unable to bear the thought of going back to work.

He looked at his watch. Three o'clock.

Kazuo called his office, and told the temp that he had a press conference and would be going straight home after it. He caught a train and headed for the house. It'd be too much trouble to explain things to Naomi, so he decided to go to the sports center directly. He felt like a little schoolboy rushing eagerly off to the pool during the summer holidays.

Suddenly his thoughts went to his lower abdomen. The dull ache in the region of his liver was no longer so painful. Maybe the injection had worked. Kazuo was revising his opinion of the eccentric Doctor Irabu.

He got to the sports center and bought himself a pool ticket good for two hours.

The locker room was clean and equipped with showers and hair dryers. While he paid out plenty in taxes, Kazuo had never actually used any of the public facilities that were available to residents at extremely reasonable prices. *I should have come here before this*, he thought.

He went down the passage and walked into the indoor pool area. The familiar odor of disinfectant tickled his nostrils. The sky-blue expanse of water lay seductively before him. Probably because it was a weekday, there was almost no one there. *I like this place.* He felt his heart lighten.

He did some warm-up exercises poolside, stretching with the greatest care.

He put a foot into the water. It wasn't cold at all. It was heated just right.

He sunk in up to his chest. It felt great. He dove down a little. That felt even better. Kazuo pushed off from the wall and started to do the crawl. The plan was to do a slow warm-up. He swung both arms over with big, generous movements, and pushed the water gently, almost tenderly, back. He kicked his legs slowly. Before he knew it, he had swum a full twenty-five meters.

He had not forgotten how to swim! The emotion of it almost overwhelmed him.

He turned and swam a second twenty-five meters. He wanted to relish the sensation of floating, so he moved his arms and legs even more slowly.

As he swam, he couldn't help breaking into a grin. The water felt fantastic. He turned over onto his back halfway and saw the spotlights in the ceiling glinting above him.

Damn! Why had it taken him this long to discover how much fun swimming was?

A happiness he had not known in recent years filled Kazuo's heart.

TWO

"Ah-hah. So swimming's your thing, is it?"

Irabu crossed his stubby little legs with considerable difficulty, then stretched out as if trying to flatten the flab on his meaty belly.

"Yes, that's right. There's a place that's not at all crowded, near us. I went there and had a swim. It was just so refreshing."

Perching lightly on his stool, Kazuo was talking about his experience at the pool the day before. He was desperate to tell someone about it. Last night he'd subjected his wife, Naomi, to a long harangue about the benefits of swimming. When he went so far as to follow her into the bathroom, she finally drove him away. Kazuo was high on that feeling of well-being you get after exercise. Even after a night had passed, he still felt all pumped up. In fact, he'd already made up his mind to stop off at the pool again on his way home from work.

"And you say the pain in your lower abdomen is better?"

"Yes. My insides are still all stirred up; there's no change there. But I feel the best I've felt in a couple of weeks."

"I'd be sorry," Irabu sniffed, "if you overlooked the effects of the injection."

"Yes, yes, of course," he hurriedly agreed. "The pain lightened very soon after."

"Swimming, of course, is a form of aerobic exercise. That means it's ideal for getting your body in order."

Irabu brought the coffee the nurse had made him up to his mouth. His glasses misted over with the steam.

"Swimming's aerobic exercise, is it?"

"Yup. The same as aerobics—you're exercising and drawing in oxygen at the same time. With weightlifting, you hold your breath while you're doing it. That sort of exercise can give you constipation." Irabu rubbed his glasses with the sleeve of his white coat. "That's why there's no need to swim quickly. It's better to take it slowly and repeat the same kind of exercise for as long as possible."

"You're saying that long distance would be good?"

"Exactly." The lenses of his glasses were absolutely filthy.

Kazuo heard the reply with a twinge of regret. While he hadn't forgotten how to swim yesterday, there was no concealing his decline in staying power; after swimming two hundred meters without a rest, he was gasping for air. He'd started to take little rests between laps.

He decided that today he was going to give some distance work a try. At university, one or two kilometers had been easy for him.

"So, want an injection?"

"What? Today as well?"

"Yup. We're giving you a drug that has to be administered every day. Mayumi!" Irabu bellowed for the nurse.

He didn't seem to have a choice, so Kazuo did as he was told and moved over. As he put his arm on the cushioned rest, the same nurse as yesterday stood before him. Kazuo remembered: *the milk-white thigh*.

The nurse grabbed a syringe in one hand. It wasn't clear quite why, but once again Irabu came up close and stared intently. Kazuo was already looking down. And once again the nurse was showing her white thigh through the split of her dress.

He felt a sharp prick in his left arm and shut his eyes. Was he imagining things, or had Irabu emitted a little groan at just that moment?

Kazuo went to the office, but found himself unable to concentrate on his work.

He was thinking about swimming.

Today I want to swim five hundred meters without a rest.

Kazuo dispensed with any small talk and brought the meeting with the sub-contractors briskly to an end. On a pretext of "going to look for reference materials," he headed for a big bookshop in the center of town. He wanted a book about swimming. He felt that his getting out of breath was partly due to a decline in physical stamina, but that there might also be a problem with his swimming style.

In the special-interest corner there were several books, but the diagrams and the layout were so badly done that none of them seemed interesting. On a whim, he headed for the magazine section. He meant to hunt down back numbers of the men's magazine *Tarzan*, because it always had a lot of articles about fitness and exercise, but quite by chance the current issue was a special issue devoted to swimming. Good luck seemed to be raining down on him.

He had a look. The diagrams were easy to understand, and it even included a catalog of swimming accessories.

Shoot, I wish I'd bought my swim trunks after I'd seen this. Kazuo felt a twinge of regret.

He did wonder about buying another pair.

He went to a nearby café where he slowly flicked through the magazine. A series of sequential diagrams explained the stroke and the kicking action for the crawl.

Ah, I see. You stretch your arms as if extending the central line of the body.

What's this? "When your hands enter the water, your arms should be bent at a ninety-degree angle?"

At age thirty-eight you'd think he would know that!

I was never more than a rank amateur. His shoulders sagged slightly at the thought.

But he was not seriously depressed. It simply meant that he'd be able to swim even better if he mastered the techniques in the magazine.

As he sat in the window, Kazuo copied the stroke movements in the illustrations. He stretched his left hand forward, but he didn't pull it back; instead he stretched his right hand out as if to put it on top of the other.

He looked up sharply. A couple at a table some way away was looking at him and stifling their laughter.

One of them gave a little cough. Kazuo's face burned.

He finished his iced coffee and thought about the day's schedule.

There was that photo session in Ebisu starting at four o'clock. But he didn't really need to be there. They were just shooting things: kitchen implements and whatnot. It was simple, assembly-line type work.

He went back to the office and wrote on the whiteboard, "In Ebisu for photo shoot, then straight home." He left the office and called the photographer on his cell. "Just shoot it the way you always do. I'm counting on you. Thanks," he told him. Then he hurried off to the train station.

Kazuo's heart was pounding with excitement during the ride home.

About halfway there, as he was gazing out at the city outside the window, he saw a billboard for Irabu General Hospital. Why, he wasn't sure, but he felt that he could trust the place. Once at the sports center, he again bought a two-hour ticket and went to the pool. He relaxed the instant the water enveloped him.

That day he succeeded in swimming five hundred meters without a break.

It was clear to him that he had achieved his goal by checking his form against *Tarzan* magazine and making his attempt only after practice.

When he clambered out of the pool, he was so short of breath that he couldn't even stand up. He lay down on a bench.

He felt an indescribable sense of fulfillment. *Tomorrow*, he thought, *I'll do one kilometer*.

No, maybe he shouldn't hurry things so much. It would be better if he just upped the distance by a hundred meters every day.

He couldn't wait for tomorrow to come. As he gasped for air, Kazuo felt a sense of exhilaration that he had not experienced for—he didn't know how many years.

"Ho-ho. So you've kept at it for an entire week, have you?"

That day, Irabu was once again listening to what Kazuo had to say with one stubby leg squeezed over the other.

"Yes. And I'm enjoying it so much. So much. It's my new morning routine."

Recently, swimming was all Kazuo wanted to talk about.

He went to the pool and the hospital every day. The Irabu General Hospital was closed to outpatients on Sunday, but the pool was open literally every day of the week. Since Kazuo couldn't sneak off work early every day, he had decided to go to the pool first thing in the morning. He'd established a pattern: starting at nine o'clock, he'd swim for an hour, then he'd go directly on to the hospital, before getting to work at about midday.

Just recently, he had finally managed to swim two kilometers without a break. He'd completely regained his old knack for the sport.

"I know what you mean. Recently I haven't been getting enough exercise either," said Irabu softly as he stroked his chin. "So those cretins over in internal medicine advised me to go on a diet."

Take a look at that double chin of yours and you'll see why, thought Kazuo sneeringly.

"So this pool of yours. Where is it?"

"It's in the basement of the local municipal sports center. It's much cleaner than those crummy private gyms; best of all, it's always empty. It's great."

"I see."

"Would you like to go, Doctor? It's only a couple of stations from here at the most."

"Maybe." Irabu groaned as he kneaded the flesh at the back of his neck. "The trouble is I can't do the breathing properly."

"That's not a problem. You can master that in no time. Anyway, you don't have to do the crawl. There's always the breaststroke."

"And it's not cold?"

"The pool's heated. It's kept at eighty-five degrees; it's almost hot."

"The truth is, I don't know how to dive."

"Diving's not allowed anyway. It's not like swimming club at school. You can have fun doing your own thing."

"Hearing you talk about it, Mr. Omori, swimming sounds like tremendous fun."

"And it *is* fun," said Kazuo with enthusiasm enough to make anyone jealous.

Perhaps Irabu really was interested, since he went so far as to discuss with Kazuo which would be better for him: shorts or briefs. *YOU! YOU IN BRIEFS!* Naturally, Kazuo didn't say that. Instead he replied blandly that either would be fine.

Then it was time for his regular injection. Getting an injection every day was no picnic, but, as far as Kazuo was concerned, the pain was cancelled out by the sight of the nurse's thigh.

He looked away when the needle went in. He would always see Irabu standing nearby, craning forward. Today he heard him swallowing loudly. The man was certainly eccentric, but he didn't let it bother him. Get used to it, and even a bull has its charms.

Nonetheless he was surprised to see Irabu waiting in front of the municipal sports center the next morning.

"Well, here I am. Little old me."

Irabu threw out one hand and giggled as he delivered this speech. He sounded like a young girl who'd followed her boyfriend overseas somewhere.

"Yesterday, after I saw you, I went and bought a swimsuit at the department store. I went for shorts."

Kazuo didn't ask, but Irabu still whipped them out of his bag to show him.

"Ah-ha . . ."

"They had flowery ones too."

The shorts Irabu had chosen for himself were fluorescent yellow. Kazuo couldn't think of anything to say.

"—So, uh, Doctor, missing work's not a problem?"

"Not for me. I took the morning off. Probably wouldn't have got any patients anyway," said Irabu, looking as if he couldn't have cared less. "Shall we go on in?"

They got changed in the locker room and went into the pool area.

Kazuo started swimming first. Given the kind of person Irabu was, he could probably take care of himself.

Kazuo sliced into the water with slow strokes. Two kicks for every one stroke. He'd gotten the hang of it just this last week. Kicking was less about propulsion: it played a supporting role keeping the buttocks afloat. It was the best way to swim long distances.

He glanced at the clock at the far end of the lane. He could make a rough calculation of how much time had passed from the distance he'd covered. He could swim five hundred meters in twelve minutes. That meant he could do two kilometers in forty-eight minutes. Conveniently for him, this pool had a system where every fifty minutes the lifeguard would give a sign and everyone had to get out of the pool for a rest. If Kazuo swam from nine o'clock exactly, until the whistle was blown, he'd complete his two-kilometer quota naturally.

He turned his head up to breathe on alternating sides. Taking a breath with every stroke was overdoing it, but once every two strokes had been hard for him until he'd got the knack, thanks to *Tarzan* magazine. This was something he hadn't managed in his student days, so in the evening of the day he finally managed to do it properly, he phoned his wife (who was working) and bragged about it for a full half hour.

Now he could swim a whole kilometer without getting tired. It was during the first kilometer that he suffered; once he went beyond that, his body eased into it. Maybe it took a little while for the rate at which he absorbed oxygen to stabilize. His wife was flabbergasted: "I can't believe you can swim two kilometers!" Kazuo himself liked to say that if you could swim one kilometer, then two was not double the distance, but just "the kilometer next door." If he had the time, maybe he could even swim five!

One-and-a-half kilometers. His speed was picking up all the time. It was about now that the marvelous, almost euphoric feeling would slowly start to well up inside him. Was it simply joy in the knowledge that the 2K mark was just around the corner, or was it something different—something more—than that? Kazuo really went through the tedious drudgery of swimming the first kilometer only for the pleasure he got from the second one.

The sound of the lifeguard's whistle shrilled across the pool.

Kazuo stopped swimming and walked over to the wall nonchalantly. It was early morning, but a number of people were there; most of them looked at Kazuo with respect. He was the only one who was swimming all out. *I'd prefer it*, thought Kazuo conceitedly, *if there were some younger women around. In the morning, all I get is middle-aged or old women. I'll come here in the evenings when I'm not so busy at work. There'll be secretaries on their way back home.*

"Most impressive, Mr. Omori," said Irabu as Kazuo climbed out of the pool. Irabu had been swimming, but with plenty of breaks. Kazuo had glanced over from time to time. Sure enough, it seemed that the crawl was beyond him, and he was very much a breaststroke man.

"It's just a matter of habit. My first time here, I was out of breath after a couple of hundred meters," responded Kazuo, rubbing himself with his towel. He began gently massaging his arms and legs.

"Well, I'm jealous. Listen, can you teach me?"

"Of course I can." Kazuo, wanting to be nice, agreed.

"Great. Let's extend our time."

"What? Right now?"

"Right now." Irabu gave a carefree grin.

The man didn't know the meaning of self-control. Kazuo wondered what he was supposed to do about going to work.

"And then I've got my consultation with you afterward?"

"Indeed you have. Just an hour or so won't be a problem."

Kazuo was outmaneuvered. They ended up extending their time and swimming some more; or rather, Kazuo ended up in the role of personal coach and spent the hour directing Irabu's every move.

"Doctor, you breathe *in* through the mouth, and *out* through the nose."

He must have repeated it a thousand times, but Irabu still sniveled each time he breathed water in through his nose.

"Doctor, you've got a great deal of natural buoyancy, so there's no need for you to kick hard."

Despite the implication that he was obese, Irabu looked slightly smug, as if buoyancy were a special talent he'd been born with.

"No, Doctor, you're forcing it when you swivel that fat neck of yours."

Toward the end, Kazuo's choice of words was less charitable. That was the only occasion but, sure enough, even Irabu looked annoyed.

When their two hours' worth of swimming was finally over, they set off for the hospital in Irabu's pea-green Porsche.

"Swimming is fabulous," declared Irabu as he climbed into the car, his face aglow. He too seemed to be high with that feeling of post-exercise well-being.

Irabu seemed to be heading down the same road he was. Kazuo saw that as justification of his own fervor.

His work was due to get busy soon, but swimming was the one thing he refused to take off his schedule. It was a routine just as important as eating three meals a day.

"Listen. If you're tired, I really think you should take it easy," Naomi said glumly. She stood looking down at him, as he lay prostrate in bed that weekend.

"I'm fine. I'll get a quick massage on my way home."

It was more than two weeks since Kazuo had started swimming, and sure enough he was beginning to feel the strain. His shoulders and back ached heavily. It was a pain that even magnetic bandages could not cure.

"You don't need to swim absolutely every single day of the week like this, do you?"

"No. Doing it day in, day out is important. Do you know why marathon runners never stop training? It's because if they take three days off, it takes them three days to get their original condition back."

"Look, as far as I know, you're not going to take part in any competitions."

"When I swim, I feel much better physically."

It was a fact. Most of the physical discomfort he'd had—except for the diarrhea—was almost gone. At night he fell asleep in no time. Fatigue and physical well-being were not mutually exclusive.

"Also, if the tiredness builds up like this, it may mean there's something wasteful in the way I swim. Now, if I could improve my form just a little bit—"

"'Runner's high,'" interrupted Naomi. "Have you heard of it? It's when you run a long time; the brain secretes endorphins that make you feel good."

"Yeah, I know about that."

He'd heard of it. "Natural highs" and all that.

"Isn't this swimming addiction of yours the same sort of thing?"

"What do you mean, 'addiction'? That's going a bit far," he said, taking offense.

"Well, it certainly seems like an addiction to me, looking in from the outside. If what you're worried about is your health, then swimming every other day would do the trick. And taking a rest if you feel tired is *normal*, for god's sake."

"Exercising to the point that you start breathing hard at least once every day. That's the ideal."

"Well, an ideal's just an ideal, right? People in prison only get to exercise once a week."

"What does that have to do with it?"

What's up with these examples that she brings into the conversation?

"People are better off if they don't live too methodically. When you were single, you were the sort of person who was quite happy to drink a carton of milk past its sell-by date."

"Don't start going on about the past. When I was young, God took good care of my stomach and my bowels. But get a little older, and he leaves you in the lur—"

At that moment the living room telephone rang. Naomi left to go answer it, and soon came back in. "A friend of yours," she said.

"Who is it?"

"Haven't a clue. 'Is my chum Kazuo at home?' he said. Sounded like an eight-year-old to me."

She handed him the cordless phone. Putting it to his ear, he heard Irabu's voice asking if he was free today. One way or another he ended up saying that yes, he was.

"Hey, Omori, want to go to the pool at Toshima Water Park?"

He couldn't believe what he was hearing: a couple of middle-aged men at a theme park pool.

"They've got a pool with a current. It makes it really easy to swim. With aerobic exercise, it's not the distance or the number of lengths, it's time that makes it effective. And we can take a break whenever we want."

"Uh-huh?" Kazuo wasn't sure what to say. "A pool with a current?"

Since that first day, Irabu had become a slave to swimming. For several days the routine had been that he'd swim at the municipal sports center with Kazuo and then go back to the hospital with him every morning.

"Yes, indeed. One circuit's about four hundred meters."

"Won't it be full of noisy kids? I mean, Toshima Water Park on a Sunday . . .?"

"Don't worry. The weather forecast says there are going to be light showers in the afternoon. The rainy season isn't over yet, and it's a bit chilly; no, it won't be crowded," Irabu said cheerfully. "I'll pick you up at the station, and we can go in my car. See you in thirty minutes."

"Huh? . . ."

The line went dead. Kazuo frowned, still clutching the receiver.

"Well, isn't that nice? You've made a new friend." Naomi gave him a watery smile. She'd obviously guessed who it had been on the phone. "Toshima Water Park. Should be a lovely outing!"

If at all possible, Kazuo was desperate to avoid going there just as two men together, so he pressed Naomi to come too.

"I have absolutely no interest in going," she said, turning him down cold.

Reluctantly, he went off to the station. Irabu rolled up in his pea-green Porsche. He was wearing Gucci sunglasses.

Kazuo looked up at the sky in which the low clouds were beginning to pile up. *Please*, he prayed, *please don't let me run into anyone I know*.

His worries were groundless. Around midday the rain started falling in earnest, and there was almost nobody in the big pool.

"It's as if we'd rented the whole place out for our private use," crowed Irabu as he did his breaststroke.

Kazuo pretended not to hear and swam solemnly on.

It was certainly good that you didn't have to turn, but like the local gym there was a compulsory rest period, which meant you weren't free to swim for a long time.

Then what on earth are we here for? Kazuo thought glumly as he swam along.

Kazuo concentrated intently on his crawl stroke as raindrops flecked the water around him.

THREE

Sure enough, feeling worn out had just been a phase, a transient thing. If you made yourself think that swimming was a matter of time, not of distance, then your form got more and more relaxed. Kazuo could now swim as easily as if he were walking.

The way he worked became more efficient. Having resolved to go swimming at nine every morning, he wanted to avoid doing any overtime late into the night. So he cut down on the number of unnecessary meetings; anything that could be dealt with by mail or fax he handled without direct personal contact.

He also refused to take part in departmental chat or gossip. As far as he was concerned, his colleagues who lingered in the office for no good reason were fools. And the ones who went out drinking every night in the name of teambuilding were pitiful coelacanths. If you wanted free time, it was up to you to make it.

Then he began wanting to have a quick dip on the way back from the office.

When his day's work was done and he was getting ready to leave, he'd get a restless, itchy feeling in his back.

This is BAD. If Naomi finds out about this, she'll start laying into me even harder with that addict theory of hers. He felt a pang of conscience.

All his doubts were swept away after he discussed the matter with Irabu.

"I'm already swimming in the evening as well," Irabu said nonchalantly. "My body demands it. Who am I to resist?"

He explained that according to the system of treatment developed by Morita somebody-or-other, the pioneer of medical psychology, letting people do exactly as they liked was the best thing for them.

The long and the short of it was that Irabu had found another pool near the hospital and swam there in the evenings.

"It's embarrassing to go to the same pool twice in the same day, isn't it?" Kazuo was surprised to hear Irabu say something like that, but the truth was, it gave him strength.

He spread out the map of central Tokyo and started looking for a pool near the office.

Luckily for him, there was a school pool within walking distance of his work. It was open to the public from 7 A.M. till 9 P.M. Even at busy times, he'd be able to say, "Just popping out for a bite of dinner," and slip off for a swim.

A pool nearby where he could swim any time he wanted. His heart swelled at the thought.

In the natural course of things a suitable day came around.

The photo shoot at the studio had finished earlier than expected. It wasn't yet seven, but Kazuo was free. *Maybe I should go home early once in a while*, he thought. But the desire to see what it was like to swim in the evening too was a physical thing that had been steadily growing inside him. Perhaps the weather—there'd been a break in the rainy season—had something to do with it. It was the kind of balmy summer evening when the beer gardens do a roaring trade.

Kazuo hastily punched his timecard and crammed into his bag the swimming trunks and towel he'd hung up to dry in the boiler room.

He devised a number of self-justifying excuses: *"I'm just going to check the place out." "A quick dip will be enough."*

Once he got there, he found a building so magnificent and stylish that he was hard-pressed to believe it was part of a junior high school gym. Without so much as a second thought, he straightaway bought a ticket.

It was emptier than his local pool, partly because it was in the center of town. He was pleased to see that most of the patrons were secretaries who'd just gotten off work.

I'm certainly not going to tell anyone at work about this secret oasis, he thought with a grin.

The women were doing water-walking in the outside lane of the pool. Kazuo swam with smooth form in the lane next to them. He never paused, but did one flip turn after another.

He felt like a true athlete. He sensed that everyone was looking at him.

He felt no hint of fatigue. His body actually felt lighter than during his morning swim.

About the point when he'd cleared the kilometer mark, he stopped hearing the noises around him.

No, that's not the right way to say it. Background noise—things like people's voices—became inaudible; the only thing that entered his ears was the sound of the water humming quietly. It happened to him all the time, but more so this evening.

As he passed the one-and-a half-kilometer mark, he began to settle into his comfort zone. Something was spreading through his brain like ink sinking into blotting paper. His sense of being an all-powerful *übermensch* swelled up even further. Was this the endorphins his wife had been talking about? Well, so what if it was? In any case, it was a lot healthier than tossing back beers.

The lifeguard whistle's sounded. The shrill, sharp sound finally reached his ears.

He had ended up swimming another two kilometers in the evening too.

As Kazuo did his cool-down exercises by the side of the pool, one of the young secretaries glanced over at him admiringly. He knew he wasn't imagining things. There was no doubt about the fire in the look she had directed toward him.

Bet your boss at work doesn't have my stamina, huh?

He'd gone and swum two times in a single day. There was about one percent of guilt in there somewhere.

But the other ninety-nine percent was pure satisfaction.

On the train ride home, the drunkards and the salarymen with drawn faces looked to him like lower life-forms who existed solely out of habit.

"Do you mind if I ask you something?"

It was evening. Naomi had brought out tea for them both as he sprawled on the sofa going over the *Tarzan* swimming special.

"Course not. What?"

Kazuo sat up and squeezed some lemon into his tea.

"How are you feeling?"

"Good." He only took half a teaspoon of sugar.

"Then why do you go to the hospital every day?"

"Well, I mean, yes, I do feel better. But I've still got diarrhea. And my stomach feels a bit bloated."

"That doesn't sound like 'feel better' to me," retorted Naomi with a pout.

"You're getting it all wrong. I'm on the way to getting better. It's just that my autonomic nerves are still in the process of adjusting."

"Hmph." Naomi sipped her tea with an I-don't-buy-it expression on her face

The TV was still on and blaring. Some minor showbiz personalities were whining and shrieking, making a great fuss over some nonsense like which dish they did or didn't want to eat.

Kazuo had finished his tea. He lay back on the sofa.

"Look," said Naomi sharply. "How long are you going to keep doing this swimming thing of yours?"

"Forever, probably."

"How about taking the odd break?"

"I told you already. If I take a break, it just makes it harder the next time."

"So what? There's no earthly reason for you to swim two kilometers a day."

"But I want to."

"What? You feel guilty if you don't?"

"No, it's not like that at all." His reply was a bit peevish, but his wife seemed to be provoking him.

"It's something I read in a book," said Naomi leaning against the back of the sofa and stretching her arms above her head. "If you jog or swim or do aerobics every day, at some point doing that exercise becomes your whole *raison d'être*." She gazed up at the ceiling. "So then your emotional stability depends on getting the exercise. And if some sort of accident makes it impossible for you to exercise, you experience a sense of loss, as bad as if someone in your family had died."

What a load of crap, thought Kazuo. It wasn't even worth his while to argue back.

"There was this runner. He'd always run twice a day, but at some point he injured his knee and couldn't run anymore. He got clinically depressed, and then he killed himself."

"So, what does that have to do with me?"

"Of course, I don't expect you to do anything like that."

"Damn right I won't."

"But the way you are now, all the signs are there. You say it's better than drinking, but personally I think it's exactly the same; in the sense of being dependent on something, I mean."

"'Dependent,' huh? I think you're going a bit far."

"Well, it happens to be true."

Kazuo was annoyed. He rolled over on the sofa, presenting his back to Naomi.

"I know what's really been wrong with you lately."

He didn't respond. He just pretended to be reading his magazine.

"I think it's something that's been building up for years."

His position on the sofa was uncomfortable, but he forced himself to maintain it out of sheer stubbornness.

"Since you passed thirty, you've become terribly full of yourself. For some reason, men are like that: as soon as people stop treating them as youngsters, they go the opposite way and develop a perverse self-confidence. When you talk to me about work, it's always, 'So-and-so from such-and-such section is an idiot'; or 'the fellow in charge of that project is completely hopeless.' When you were in your twenties, you weren't like that, but now that you've become a manager, you've started getting mean with people. You get this look on your face like, 'No one else is going to do it, so I guess it's up to me to save the day.' I remember when Sato—the guy who works under you, who came around here once—messed up something and you said, 'The guy's got no future.' You can be so cold! You say it's a waste of time even to tell people off when they make mistakes. But that's not what relationships with other people are supposed to be about. Work is about people helping each other—"

"Shut up," he shouted savagely. She had definitely touched a nerve.

For a while there was silence between them.

"I'm sick of it," said Naomi with a sigh. "You're thirty-eight years old, and you're still so intolerant."

Kazuo snapped. He turned around and flung the magazine at her. It hit the wall. Naomi was shocked. She stood up.

"What are you doing? That's dangerous—"

"Woman, will you shut up?"

"Don't you 'woman' me."

"Why? What you gonna do about it?" Kazuo said roughly.

"Before we got married, you promised that you'd never call me 'woman.' I hate bullying husbands who call their wives 'woman.'"

"Well, you just go ahead and hate them," he barked, sticking out his chin.

The cushion Naomi threw hit Kazuo right in the face. He was about to protest when a box of tissues came flying through the air. That got him in the face too.

"That hurt!" His eyes were watering, but now he saw that Naomi was clutching a clock.

Then he remembered. His wife was a terror when she got angry. When she got worked up, she would bombard him with any object within grabbing range.

He hastily fled from the living room into the bathroom and slid the bolt across.

Naomi charged after him. She thumped on the sliding door for a while.

"If that's the kind of person you are, then don't even bother coming out. You're not getting into my bedroom tonight." Then the voice turned sarcastic. "You must be pleased you've got water in there. You can swim to your heart's content."

The light was switched off. Cold bitch!

Kazuo sat down heavily on the bath mat. In this sort of mood, Naomi wouldn't be making him breakfast for quite a while. He started to feel very sorry for himself.

Despite Naomi's criticism, Kazuo did not stop his swimming.

In fact, swimming twice a day was becoming his standard routine. If he juggled things cleverly, he could just about make the time for it. Swimming twice always made him feel healthier.

Then a new desire bubbled up inside him.

Just once, he wanted to try swimming for a really long time.

In Japan, the Ministry of Health (or was it the Ministry of Education?) had declared that pools must make sure that swimmers took regular rests. As a result, ten minutes in every hour were given over to this rest time, which meant it wasn't possible to swim continuously for more than fifty minutes at a stretch. Since it had even been like that at Toshima Water Park, it was clear that swimming pools throughout Japan were doing the same thing.

Kazuo had taken a look at privately run pools, but they all seemed to give preferential treatment to school groups. Only a couple of lanes would be open to the public, and they were usually crowded. It would be impossible to swim at a steady pace for a long time.

Once he'd asked the lifeguard if he couldn't just let him swim on through the break. He was turned down. "Nothing doing. A rule's a rule," the lifeguard said, his expression quite blank.

Damn this stupid country that wants to control everything! Kazuo felt like swimming far out to sea.

As far as Kazuo was concerned, two kilometers was the gateway to happiness. Up to the one-kilometer mark, swimming was boring and not remotely enjoyable. But once past that point, his discomfort vanished; once he had gone beyond one-and-a-half kilometers, he was euphoric. The euphoria would gradually intensify, only to be brought to an enforced end by the whistle of the lifeguard.

Who knows what sort of ecstasy awaited him if he could swim for two or three hours straight? Pretty soon he came to detest the sound of the whistle.

Irabu seemed to feel exactly the same way.

"I couldn't agree more. When to take a breather should be left up to the individual."

Irabu was completely devoted to the two-swims-a-day routine.

He had even discovered a third pool and was swimming them all in rotation.

"It's after fifty minutes that your brain starts emitting endorphins," said Irabu, rubbing his head.

"Ah. My wife said the same thing," said Kazuo. "About that endorphin stuff."

"It's like this. The human brain is fitted with a mechanism to release you from pain when you're in dire straits. It's endorphins, which work rather like the 'mercy of God.' Obviously, I've not had the experience myself, but for the sake of argument let's say someone is strangling you and ends up killing you. At the start, it hurts, but once you're at the point of death, the endorphins should have kicked in, and you'd be feeling good."

"Interesting."

"Ergo, it is impossible to die in pain."

Wow! Now there's a doctor for you, thought Kazuo admiringly.

"At least . . . I *think* it is."

Kazuo almost tumbled off his stool.

"I would like to try that—swimming for about five hours straight. Let the endorphins really flood out."

"Wouldn't that be bad for you?"

"Not a bit."

Kazuo felt inspired. He wanted to say to Naomi, "I told you so."

"What about doing it in the sea?" suggested Kazuo.

"Doesn't it make you nervous when your feet can't touch the bottom?"

"Maybe. A bit."

"Yes, a swimming pool's the best. No waves--and no sharks either."

Irabu had a point. He definitely didn't want to bump into any sharks, or even jellyfish, for that matter.

"There must be a pool somewhere where we'd be allowed to swim as long as we want." Kazuo crossed his arms and exhaled audibly. "Doesn't one of your doctor friends have a twenty-five-meter pool in his backyard?"

"I have a friend with an eel farm."

Kazuo winced as he imagined himself swimming along with a swarm of eels.

"At night, of course, we'd be able to swim to our heart's content."

That was a strange remark. Kazuo had just a suspicion of what Irabu was getting at.

"No lifeguards around either."

"What?" He couldn't believe his ears. "What exactly are you proposing?"

"Sneaking in, of course. At night." Irabu was as cool as the proverbial cucumber.

"No. Never. Not on your life. I couldn't possibly—"

"You know the sports center we always go to? You don't think there's anyone on night duty there, do you?"

"I doubt it."

"There's nothing valuable there. And I don't think they've got a contract with a security company."

"You're probably right, but—" Kazuo looked into Irabu's eyes. "Doctor, are you really going to do it?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet."

"Well, I don't think you should."

"If you'll come with me, Mr. Omori, then I'm happy to give it a try tonight."

"Ooh—I . . ." Kazuo frantically shook his head. "I mean, if we get caught, it's breaking and entering."

"No one's going to arrest us for something like this. Even if we do have to break one of the windows in the toilet to get in, we're not going to rampage through the office. The staff will just think, 'Oh, some young hoodlums have smashed it.'"

Kazuo groaned in assent. Irabu certainly had a point.

"How about it, then? We can break in at midnight and swim straight through till five in the morning."

"But what if—"

Kazuo didn't have the guts. He felt he would be crossing the boundary of acceptable behavior.

"All right then. Think about it. Me, I'm game any time."

"Mm."

He received his daily injection. The nurse exposed her thigh as she rubbed disinfectant into his left arm. As the needle neared the skin, Irabu's head loomed over him, as always.

Normally Kazuo would look away, but today, for some reason, he glanced across at Irabu.

The doctor's face was flushed. His eyes were glinting brightly, and he was swallowing excitedly.

Who is this guy? Kazuo found himself thinking how weird a character Irabu was.

As he rubbed the arm after the injection, Kazuo told himself sternly that at all costs he mustn't agree to the breaking-and-entering scheme.

The thought of swimming straight through without being bothered by anyone was appealing, though.

FOUR

Today was the day for sending the final proofs of the magazine to the printer. Kazuo had again started to feel a bit off-color. As he went about his work, his chest would suddenly start throbbing, or a pain would flare up in his stomach. There was also something funny going on with his arms. From his elbows down, they were itchy in a weird way, and he had to tense up to keep them from trembling.

He knew why. When they were finalizing the proofs, he could not manage to get any time to himself. He'd had to stay in the office for two nights in a row, and hadn't swum a stroke in the meantime.

Kazuo told himself that he only had to bear it for one more night. Whatever happened, tomorrow morning was the deadline for proofing, and after that he'd be freed from his work for a while.

First, he would go home and sleep through till evening. Then, having got his strength back, he'd head for the pool. Then he would swim, savoring every second of it. Two sets of two kilometers. He was unhappy that he couldn't swim on through, without a break, but that would be asking too much. He really ought to hunt out a pool that wasn't busy and didn't have a compulsory rest. Tokyo was a big place; if he looked, he was sure to find one.

If things got desperate he could always swim the English Channel. He'd propose an article, "Our Editor Attempts Channel Crossing," and then do the thing at the company's expense. Fine, he thought, it may be a magazine for housewives; it may be a magazine about childcare; but if he said he'd get them to accept his proposal, then he would get them to accept it, goddammit. Surely the company would admit that they owed him that much.

Tensing his stomach, Kazuo steeled himself against his physical discomfort. Luckily, none of his colleagues had noticed that he was under the weather. He used his handkerchief to wipe away the greasy beads of sweat that kept appearing on his forehead. He gritted his teeth and suppressed the vague feeling of unease that came welling up inside his mouth.

"Excuse me . . ." Sato, his subordinate, came up and stood next to him.

"Yeah?" he replied, his face a nonchalant mask. Sato's face was stiff with anxiety.

"I am afraid that the map for the secondhand shop guide isn't ready yet."

"You're kidding me."

"I'm sorry." Sato bowed his head in apology. "I thought that they'd be done by now ..."

"But what?" Kazuo asked with a scowl.

"I thought I made it clear to the production team that I wanted them to take care of everything. But it turns out they thought we would be doing the maps here."

"So what the hell were you thinking? You just waited for Editorial Production to finish everything, and didn't bother to check how it was coming?"

"I'm sorry."

Kazuo looked at his watch. It was past nine. He put his head in his hands. He was in charge, so the final check was his responsibility. Would everything be ready by tomorrow morning?

"Okay, tell them to get started on the typesetting of just the text part."

"That's taken care of. I pressured them and they said they'd do it by tonight. It's just the illustrations that are the problem. I've called everybody, but there's nobody—"

"—Nobody left in the offices?"

"That's right." Sato shriveled with embarrassment. "Do you think we could we ask your wife?"

"I should kick your ass, you prick. Trying to get my wife involved in a mess like this."

"Sorry, sir. Sorry."

"So how many maps are you talking about? How many do we have to make?"

"Seventy-five."

Kazuo felt like bursting into tears. He already had a mountain of galley proofs to check.

"Go down to the design department and grab me a Rotring pen and some paper. I'll draw the maps. Provided the lines I draw are straight, it should be okay. Beggars can't be choosers, right?"

"Yes, that's very true."

"Oh, shut up!" bellowed Kazuo, before he could stop himself.

When Sato returned, he sent him to keep an eye on the typesetter, and picked up the pen and a ruler.

He started drawing the maps, one by one, somehow managing to stop his hands from shaking. Since he had to reduce the scale of the maps, he was burdened with the extra task of computing the ratios of vertical against horizontal.

The diarrhea attacked him several times in the course of his work. And each time Kazuo had to stop drawing and rush off to the bathroom.

Sato came back from the typesetter and started sticking text onto the maps Kazuo had drawn. They were at a late stage of the whole process, and still someone spotted some misprints. Kazuo yelled at Sato, "You fucker! Do your fucking job properly and proof the thing right here, right now!" But Sato just kept mumbling, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," over and over again. There was no other solution, so Kazuo grabbed the film of the previous issue, and started looking for the same words.

In no time, night had given way to dawn.

All the other departments had finished checking their proofs. The staff had returned from the printer's and now sat waiting for the first train. Kazuo asked the editor-in-chief to look over his pages minus the maps, then shooed him off, saying, "Don't worry. I'll be responsible for delivering the rest of it to the printer." He sent Sato home too. He was sure he'd be able to work faster by himself.

It was nine in the morning when he finally finished proofing the pages he was in charge of. He clutched the proofs as he sped to the printer's in a taxi. This, he thought, is what real exhaustion feels like. His insides were growling. He felt sick and threw up in the printer's toilet. As there was nothing in his stomach, all that came out was vinegary gastric juice.

On the train home, Kazuo wrestled with the uneasy feeling that was welling up from the back of his throat. He felt he might start shouting if he just stood still, so he walked back and forth, up and down the train.

He got off two stops before the one where he lived and made for Irabu General Hospital. He had decided to do this several hours previously. The only person who understood him was Irabu, he thought.

"Ah, Mr. Omori. It's been a while."

Irabu greeted him in his usual relaxed tone. It was their first meeting for three days, but it felt like three years to Kazuo. He was so happy that he wanted to give Irabu a hug. His eyes filled with tears. It was pathetic.

"What's wrong? Is it hay fever?"

Come to think of it, it *was* already summer. But Kazuo was just grateful to Irabu for being there.

"The truth is, Doctor . . ."

His words coming in a torrent, Kazuo held forth about how he'd been holed up at work for three entire days; how he had been unable to swim all that time; and how that fool Sato had caused him so much grief. His mouth just ran on independently. The words just poured out.

He also complained that physically he was feeling awful. He wrapped his arms around his stomach, declaring that his insides were in a state of mutiny. He gave a belch to emphasize his point.

"Don't worry. You'll be as right as rain in no time at all," said Irabu, completely unflustered.

"Do you mean it?" Kazuo was now seriously thinking of hugging the man.

"Yes. You see you are experiencing classic withdrawal symptoms."

"Withdrawal symptoms?"

"Yes. And the reason is that you haven't been swimming. You, Mr. Omori, and I, are both now physically conditioned so that we cannot remain healthy unless we swim. So, provided you have a swim this evening, everything will go back to normal for you."

"This evening? Isn't that risky?"

"Not at all," Irabu replied offhandedly.

"When you say, 'Not at all' do you mean it's—"

"—You should count yourself lucky that you're not dependent on something like alcohol. Alcohol messes up the organs. But with swimming, your body firms up, your circulation gets better—basically, there's no downside."

Kazuo gasped feebly.

"There are all sorts of dependencies that people develop—dependency on their job, dependency on their volunteer work, dependency on organic vegetables! I think we can safely say that swimming has got to be one of the most harmless of any of them."

"Yes, but . . . if I could, I'd like to avoid having any sort of dependency at all."

"There's no need to worry, I assure you. You'll get sick of it soon enough." Irabu had an easy smile on his lips. "In a way, psychosomatic disease is a sort of 'command from God.' It's something you can't fight. The best thing is just to go with the flow."

"I wonder if I will get tired of swimming?"

"Oh yes, you'll get tired of it. Sick and tired of it. Ha-ha-ha!"

Kazuo was not quite sure why, but he definitely felt comforted. He had begun to think that maybe Irabu was a good psychiatrist after all. If nothing else, the doctor was able to soothe his feelings.

"Oh, and by the way," said Irabu, dropping his voice. "I was thinking about sneaking into the pool tonight. How about it, Mr. Omori? Midnight, in front of the municipal gym."

"Are you really going to do it?"

"Sure. Like you, I just want to swim for five hours or so uninterrupted."

"Yes, but, me, I can't . . ." Kazuo choked on his reply.

"I thought you'd say that. You have a great deal of practical common sense."

Why did he feel he was being mocked for lacking courage?

"Well then, I'll just have to go by myself."

He's got guts, all right, thought Kazuo.

"But there is just one thing I'd like you to help me with." Irabu leaned toward him. Kazuo also hunched forward, and leaned closer. "There's a window in the bathroom at the back of the municipal sports center. Initially, I planned to break that to get in. But I do want to avoid damage to property as much as I can, you understand?"

"Naturally."

"You're going to go to the pool this evening, aren't you? While you're there, I'd like you to remove the window lock with a screwdriver."

"The lock on the toilet window?"

"That's right. It should be easy to remove the hasp with a screwdriver. Take it off, and take it home."

"Mm," Kazuo said.

"I imagine they check the whole place before closing up for the night. But if the lock's broken, they'll probably just leave it. Hardly likely to get all worked up and call someone in to fix it, you know? It's just a gym, for God's sake."

"You've got a point."

"So, I'm counting on you."

"Yeah, okay."

Kazuo was surprised at how readily he'd agreed. Minor criminal offense though it was, he felt no resistance to playing the role of scout for an act of breaking and entering. Far from it, he was full of respect for Irabu.

Tonight this man was going to swim to his heart's content without anybody interrupting him.

He'd probably unleash a tidal wave of endorphins in his brain.

Irabu would walk straight into a world of happiness, while Kazuo tiptoed around the edges.

"All right, then, shall we do your injection?"

Kazuo moved over, as Irabu instructed.

"Oh, Doctor," said Kazuo. "I don't think I'm going to be able to get to sleep." He felt that he was too physically exhausted to sleep.

"Look, I'll give you some tranquilizers. Here, take these."

Kazuo was handed two pills. He popped them into his mouth.

"They'll kick in about the time you get home."

Kazuo put his arm on the cushion and relaxed his whole body.

As he watched the nurse pat disinfectant onto his arm, he wondered what would become of him in the future.

Would he ever be healthy again like in the old days?

The nurse exposed her thigh and leaned over him, plunging the needle into his arm.

Kazuo looked at the doctor absentmindedly, just as he'd done the last time.

Irabu hunched forward and pushed his face in closer. His forehead was bright red, and his cheeks twitched slightly. It was quite clear that he was in a state of arousal.

Kazuo finally understood. *Irabu had an injection fetish*.

Here was a man who experienced ecstasy at the very moment that the needle punctured the flesh.

Kazuo didn't feel that he'd been duped. He felt calm and indifferent toward Irabu. It struck him as foolish to be inhibited, and he stared openly at the nurse's thigh. The words "Watch This Space" might as well have been printed on a small sticker attached to her crotch. He looked up. The nurse, who'd never done so before, was grinning from ear to ear. An exhibitionist, perhaps? This neurology department really had all the bases covered!

The tranquilizers must have kicked in, as he started feeling woozy in the train home.

He reached home before twelve, unrolled a futon in the tatami room, and collapsed onto it. Since the quarrel with Naomi, they had been sleeping separately.

He enjoyed the feeling of floating down into the darkness. When he came to, the room was pitch-black. He stared up at the ceiling. He had no idea where he was, or what time it was.

He tentatively moved his head. Aah, yes, that was it. He was back home after dropping everything off at the printer's.

He rubbed his hands over his face and stayed where he was for a while, immobile. For some reason, he had no sense of what sort of time it might be. He knew he'd been asleep and woken up, but he had no idea how long he had been asleep.

But he felt as though he had slept deeply. He wondered when the last time was that he had slept so well.

He turned his head and looked toward the window. There was no trace of daylight filtering through the curtains.

It was quiet too. No noise from the TV, no kitchen sounds.

Still wrapped up in the blankets, he bent down and hunted around for his watch. It was right there under his pillow. He picked it up and looked at the face.

It said eleven-thirty. *That must be eleven-thirty at night*, he thought.

He gave a start. The pool had closed hours ago now.

He sprang to his feet in a panic. He had failed to do what he promised Irabu.

What have I done! Did I sleep straight through for twelve hours? Kazuo squatted down on top of the futon and sighed deeply.

Kazuo could have kicked himself for not setting the alarm. He had never imagined he would sleep this long. He had let Irabu down. The doctor must have gotten a shock when he found that the toilet window didn't open. For all he knew, he might be furious with him.

But when Irabu had asked him to come, he had proposed that they meet at midnight. Presumably, then, that was the time Irabu was planning to sneak in.

Then there was still time. If he set off to the sports center now, he'd be able to get hold of Irabu. He'd have a chance to say sorry for messing up today—and to make it clear that he would definitely unscrew the lock tomorrow.

Kazuo got up and put on his trousers. He stuck his arms into the sleeves of his polo shirt and strapped on his watch. Then he picked up his sports bag. It was the bag he always used, with all his swimming kit packed inside. For the moment, he didn't really know what he was going to do.

What am I carrying this bag for? And out of the apartment he went.

Kazuo dashed through the dark residential streets.

That weird feeling of his insides grinding about had stopped. His body felt incredibly light. He couldn't believe that he had been so unwell only twelve hours ago.

Feeling this good, he thought, there was no distance he couldn't swim.

What? He stopped short in his tracks. He was astounded that he had entertained the thought even for a second. Was he really going to do it?

Anyway, I've got to hurry. Kazuo started running again. The first thing to do was to find Irabu.

When he reached the sports center, the doctor was nowhere to be seen. The entrance was silent in the pale blue glow of the streetlights.

Had he already left? Kazuo's shoulders sagged.

Then he heard the throaty rumble of a car exhaust. He immediately recognized the distinctive sound of the engine. And, sure enough, the pea-green Porsche drew up in front of the sports center with all the dignity of a giant frog.

"Ho-ho, Mr. Omori, so you decided to come after all," said

Irabu, sticking his big, grinning face out of the window. He gave a carefree smile. "That's marvelous."

"Actually, the truth is . . ."

Kazuo ran over and explained the situation with his head bowed meekly.

"Oh, that's all, is it?" Irabu was forgiving. "Can't be helped. For people who aren't used to them, tranquilizers are pretty powerful things."

What a big heart the man has, marveled Kazuo. *I would follow him anywhere.*

"I know it's a bad thing to do, but shall we smash the glass?"

"Huh?"

"There's a wrench in the car toolbox, somewhere."

"I didn't think we were going to go ahead with it . . ."

"There you go again, dragging your feet. After all, you came prepared." Irabu was pointing at Kazuo's bag.

"This? Oh. Yeah, well . . ." Again his answer died in his throat.

"Chop-chop. We're wasting time. Let's get moving."

Irabu opened the boot of the Porsche, pulled out a wrench, and walked around to the back of the building. Kazuo followed, as if under a spell.

Why am I doing this? Do I want to be guilty of breaking and entering? So ran the monologue in Kazuo's not-yet-fully-functional brain.

But at the same time there was a burning sensation deep in his throat. Before him was a deserted pool. A deserted pool where he could swim all he liked until morning, with no one to interrupt him.

If he swam continuously for five hours, what would happen to him? He could get his fill of that supreme bliss that he had had only the mildest taste of until now.

Irabu stopped in front of the bathroom window, quickly swung the wrench down, and broke the glass. A tinkling sound echoed through the darkness of the night. This man never seemed to hesitate about anything. He had made a neat little hole exactly the size of a CD.

Irabu stuck his hand through the hole, undid the lock, and opened the window.

"Damn it! I left the stepladder in the car. Not to worry." Irabu spoke without a hint of nerves. "Sorry, Omori, but would you act as my mounting block?"

Kazuo was completely submissive. He knelt down, placed both his hands on the ground in front of him, and waited for Irabu to step onto his back.

Irabu climbed up. He weighed a ton. It was like being trodden on by an elephant. Kazuo's face contorted at the pressure.

"Huh? The window's a bit on the small side."

Irabu was trying to dive in headfirst. Kazuo felt a searing pain run through his back. Irabu had jumped.

Kazuo rolled over and collapsed. Silver stars floated before his eyes. The pain did not let up for some time, and he lay there all scrunched up. After a moment he heard a groan. He had to think for a moment about which of them was making the sound. *It's coming from the window*, he thought.

He saw a massive bottom. It was stuck tight in the window frame.

"Ooh, uuh," Irabu groaned, flapping his legs.

Kazuo stood up. "Are you all right, Doctor?" he asked.

"Give me a bit of a shove, would you?"

"Er—all right."

Kazuo gave the bottom a good shove. It didn't move an inch. The window frame was biting into the flesh of Irabu's buttocks.

This time, Kazuo tried pulling. Irabu still didn't budge. Kazuo wondered what to do, and finally settled for the pulling option. If he pushed, they'd only encounter the same problems when he tried to get back out again. This evening's plan was canceled. Better to try again some other time.

"Hee-hee-hee." Irabu was laughing.

The man had nerves of steel, laughing in a crisis like this. Kazuo got into position and pulled Irabu's legs, putting all his weight into it.

"Tee-hee-hee." Still laughing.

It wasn't going to work. Kazuo stopped pulling and listened closely.

"Urgh—argh—hic."

Irabu had the hiccups. In fact, he was sobbing.

What was wrong with the man? Until a moment ago, he was all fearless and swashbuckling. Where had that gone?

"What is it, Doctor?"

"My mommy'll be angry with me."

Mommy? Kazuo was speechless. Now was hardly the time or place for worries like that. When morning came the police would arrest them. He would be nabbed as an accomplice. Then what would happen to his job? His family? Naomi would leave him and go back to live with her parents.

Placing his heels against the wall, Kazuo reached out, squeezed his fingers over the windowsill and grabbed hold of Irabu's belt.

He took a deep breath. He tensed his legs and arms.

The next moment the buckle came off in his hand. All he'd managed to do was to break Irabu's belt.

Kazuo just stood there, his hand resting on his hips. He sighed repeatedly.

"Mr. Omori," Irabu said, his voice weak and quavering. "Just leave me, and go on home."

"I have no intention of going home. If you get arrested, that's bad news for me too."

Until a few minutes ago, this was a man he'd thought he would follow anywhere.

"I think you should break the glass doors in the lobby."

"What sort of idiotic suggestion is that?" Kazuo said, becoming agitated.

Was this the time to be talking about getting even in deeper?

Kazuo put his hands against the wall, leaned down, and shook his head. The bottom line was that their plan had been flawed at the moment of conception. Even if they had succeeded in swimming for five hours in an empty pool, that one time would not have been enough to quench their desires. They would have wanted to go a second time. He was hooked on this the same way people get hooked on drugs. It just went on and on escalating. Why had it taken him so long to realize something so obvious?

At that instant, a siren wailed in the distance. It was a police car.

Kazuo's back went rigid; then he started trembling. Had someone reported them?

The siren grew gradually louder. Kazuo's heart was beating like a drum.In his head, the words *My company! My neighbors! My wife!* whirled around and around.

He was finished. He would be in all the papers: the middle-aged weirdo who tried to break into a public pool in the middle of the night. The media would swarm all over a ridiculous story like that.

That was the worst part. How ridiculous this whole thing was.

Kazuo wanted to run, but his legs refused to move. Irabu was now writhing around desperately.

The police car was now passing along the street in front of the sports center.

What was going on? Kazuo cocked his ear in the direction of the siren. No doubt about it, the police car was going away.

Kazuo's body suddenly went limp, and he slid down to the ground.

They were safe! God, what a shock the siren had given him! He breathed in deeply and pushed his hair back off his forehead. *Why on earth*, he asked himself, *am I doing something so totally stupid?*

He suddenly realized that his palms were damp with sweat. He slowly pulled himself to his feet.

"Mis-ter O-mo-ri!"

"Shut up, you moron!"

Kazuo administered a brisk slap to Irabu's bottom.

His heart was still racing. He shrugged his shoulders in an effort to shake off some of the left-over tension.

Right. None of his bony parts are stuck. It's the fat that's causing us problems. The old trick you use for slipping rings off fingers might be the answer.

There was only moonlight to see by, but Kazuo looked around carefully. He hunted around near the building. As this was a sports center, at the very least there should be a place where you could wash your feet.

It did not take him long to find it. There was even a coiled-up hose as a bonus. A jerryrigged shelf held an assortment of cleansers and detergents. *Probably for washing down the concrete terrace,* thought Kazuo. *Perfect!* To him Irabu's bottom was no more than the haunch of a cow or the hindquarters of an elephant.

He turned on the tap. The hose started to thrash about like a live animal. Kazuo grabbed the hose near its end and walked back to Irabu.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to get you out, so you'd better just grin and bear it."

He sprayed water onto Irabu's bottom, and then sprinkled it with detergent. He spread the powder around and rubbed it in with his hands. In no time at all, it had lathered up.

"Hey, it's freezing cold!"

"Shut up and be quiet!"

Kazuo turned the water off and wiped his hands on his trousers.

As he got his breath back, he stared at Irabu's bottom for a while.

My eyes have been opened. I am all right now. I don't know if the physical side of my problems will get better or not, but emotionally I am okay.

Kazuo grabbed hold of Irabu's ankles.

Ready. Set. He yanked them vigorously.

"Ow!" screamed Irabu.

"Keep your mouth SHUT!" Kazuo yelled back.

It was working. Ever so slowly, Irabu was coming unstuck. Kazuo planted his feet as if for a tug-of-war. He gritted his teeth so hard he could hear a grinding sound from the back of his mouth.

Suddenly there was no more resistance. Kazuo shot backward. His legs flew out in front of him like a cossack dancer, and he collapsed in a heap in the middle of the hedge.

As he lay there flat on his back, his eyes wandered. There was a crescent moon in the night sky. The moon was shining kindly and quietly upon the world below.

"Oh, the pain, the pain."

Kazuo recognized Irabu's voice. He raised his head. Irabu lay just beneath the window. He looked like a sea lion.

Kazuo got to his feet and walked over to him. Irabu was breathing in short gasps. "So, are you all right?" Kazuo asked.

"No, I am not all right. I broke my glasses."

"That's all?"

"*And* I've got a nosebleed."

Kazuo saw that there was a patch of red under Irabu's nose.

"Don't worry. I'll wash it off for you."

Kazuo got out his handkerchief. He turned on the tap and sprinkled the handkerchief with water from the hose. While he was at it, he also washed away the detergent suds. Breaking the window was bad enough, though. The least they could do was tidy up after themselves.

"I suppose we'd have been better off going for the sea," said Irabu.

"How about building a twenty-five-meter pool in the yard out behind the hospital? You only need one lane, after all."

"Hmm. Not a bad idea."

They stayed put for a while. They sat beneath the window with their legs splayed out in front of them.

Irabu had some cigarettes on him. Kazuo borrowed one and had a smoke.

The smoke slowly seeped into his lungs. When he exhaled, the white smoke floated up into the night sky in irregular clouds.

He went back home. As he opened the front door, he saw that there was a light on in the living room at the back.

Naomi was awake. She was reading a book. "You're back," she said in a quiet voice.

"You still awake?" Kazuo walked straight into the kitchen and helped himself to a can of beer from the fridge.

"Want one?"

"Sure, why not?"

He set Naomi's beer down on the table and threw himself down on the sofa on the opposite side of the room.

"Where were you?" she asked, opening her beer.

"At the swimming pool."

"Liar." She narrowed her eyes.

"Really, I was. But it was closed."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," and he gave an involuntary grimace.

"What's wrong?"

"Eh?" He thought for a minute. He leaned back deeply into the sofa and sighed. "In fact . . ." He was about to explain when he burst out laughing. He was overcome with a sense of how ridiculous the whole thing was.

"What is it? Tell me! Have you been having that much fun?" Naomi had caught the bug and she started laughing too.

Thinking that couples shouldn't have secrets from one another, Kazuo told her everything that had happened today.

He made clear that he was all right now. And while he was at it, he apologized for their recent falling-out.

"That doctor of yours may have been an injection fetishist with an Oedipus complex," gasped Naomi, her shoulders heaving with laughter. "But since he cured you, he was a good doctor as far as the actual results go."

"I suppose you're right." And Kazuo again burst out laughing.

"You know," Naomi announced suddenly. "I was really worried."

"About what?"

"About you. I genuinely thought you were going mad."

"Ah . . . I'm so sorry."

"I checked our savings account. If the worst came to the worst and you had to leave your job, I thought we had enough to get by for about six months."

"You were that worried?"

"Yes, I was. Just like you, I couldn't sleep."

"I'm sorry." Again, Kazuo bowed his head in apology.

Naomi leaned in across the sofa. There was a tight little smile on her lips. She was, it seemed, in the best of good moods.

"Next time you go swimming, take me with you."

"Fine. Okay."

"I don't want to go every day, though."

"I can appreciate that."

It was the first time in ages that they were talking to each other like a normal couple. Naomi went and got herself another beer and started getting tipsy. Her face reddened, and she started flirting with him.

Come to think of it, swimming wasn't the only way to work off physical energy. Now that *would probably be great aerobic exercise.* Kazuo's face broke into a huge grin at his own lascivious insight, and he leaned over Naomi.

A cool night breeze blew in through the open window. Outside, a dog howled in the distance.

Making a Stand

ONE

“So, sedatives didn’t do you any good, then?” The young doctor folded his arms and gave a thoughtful little grunt. “To be honest with you, we’ve never seen anything like it here before.” His eyes took on a faraway look, and he sighed softly.

A little distance away, the nurses were eavesdropping intently, their curiosity visibly aroused. Tetsuya knew they were shooting glances in his direction. They were all trying to sneak a glimpse of his crotch. Weren’t they supposed to feel *sorry* for their patients?

Tetsuya Taguchi felt the depression coming on. He tugged the hem of his shirt over his erect organ. But the thing was so vigorously upright that it could not be concealed.

“According to the literature, it would appear that this is something called sustained erection syndrome, or *Penis petrificatus*. There’ve only been a handful of cases reported since World War II.”

Tetsuya’s shoulders sagged as he listened. He was appalled at the situation he found himself in.

“There isn’t any one surefire way to treat the condition; but apparently it’s not incurable, either. The records say that the longest case lasted 180 days.”

“One hundred and eighty days!” Tetsuya couldn’t help echoing the doctor's words. He felt woozy, as if he might suddenly slither down onto the floor.

"One thing you ought to know: this condition has never yet caused anyone any actual physical harm," added the doctor, in an effort to be comforting.

"But it hurts, I tell you," moaned Tetsuya. "Having a hard-on, on and on and on like this."

"As much as possible, try not to constrict your privates. You should wear boxer shorts and the most loose-fitting, baggy trousers you've got."

"But I'll stand out like a sore thumb if I dress like that. I've got to go to work every day, you know."

"Well, I'd suggest you keep your jacket on, then."

"But it's summer. It'd look strange."

"Mr. Taguchi, I understand your frustration, but I'm not sure what else I can advise."

The doctor was stumped. The sight of his puzzled frown plunged Tetsuya into even deeper despair.

The day before yesterday, just before waking up, he'd had a dirty dream. In it, he had gotten back together with his ex-wife Sayoko, and they'd had sex. Tetsuya had felt intense desire for her as she wept and begged his forgiveness and admitted, Yes, yes, she was the one who'd been in the wrong. She really is a fine woman, he'd thought to himself as he looked at her flushed face. The sex had been too real to be a dream. He had even felt the heat of her body against his skin.

The shrill ringing of the alarm clock jerked him back into reality and self-hatred. He had gone and dreamed about her again. Why was he still clinging to her memory? It was more than three years since they had split up. He reached down to his crotch and was startled to discover his penis rearing up like a length of young bamboo. It was the flagrant virility of a teenager.

It had happened when he had clambered out of bed and was making for the toilet. The room was chaotically messy, and his foot had slipped on a magazine on the floor. The instant he grabbed hold of the bookshelf, down tumbled the Japanese dictionary that had been perched precariously on the top shelf. As Tetsuya lay sprawled on the floor, the thick, heavy dictionary scored a perfect bull's-eye on his groin.

It hurt so much he thought he'd pass out from the pain. For a while he lay scrunched up on the floor. He cried, though his tears were half from self-pity. This was the sordid everyday life of a thirty-five-year-old man. Definitely not for public consumption.

After he had taken his morning pee he bit into his breakfast toast. The center of his body felt strange, so he glanced down and saw that his penis was still standing tall. He wrinkled his brow in puzzlement. His steamy fantasies were over and done with. What the hell was going on?

It remained erect throughout the train ride to work. The bulge at his crotch was clearly visible. He did up all the buttons of his jacket and then held his briefcase over the offending part. He was terrified of being mistaken for a dirty old man and took care to avoid standing near any women passengers.

He arrived at the office and started going about his work but his organ showed no sign of going down. Needless to say, he had never experienced anything like this before. He started to feel distinctly anxious.

Tetsuya went to the toilets, locked himself into a stall, and tried his luck with masturbation. He gave himself a mental rerun of his morning dream and ejaculated after three minutes or so. He looked down at his penis, but it was still erect. All that had changed was that now it was hurting too. It was a throbbing pain, welling up from the depths of the spongy flesh.

What did it mean? He was confused and tried to think things through. He had to admit he had no idea what was going on.

With the afternoon came the fear. He was unable to focus on his work; when people spoke to him, he was distracted. He glanced surreptitiously downward countless times, and every time he felt his gloom increase. No question about it: this was freakish, abnormal. Wondering whether his cock would stand to attention forever and ever, amen, was a torment. He told his section chief he was feeling a bit under the weather and left work early. Perhaps it was because he'd been pale, but the chief was clearly concerned about him.

As soon as he got back to his flat, he went into the bathroom and poured cold water over his penis. Then he wrapped it in a wet towel. But it stood just as stiff as ever. Despair crushed his chest and made it hard to breathe. The food wouldn't go down his throat.

It'll be all right in the morning. He wanted that to be true so badly that he ended up not sleeping a wink all night. And his condition did not change one iota. He himself might be sick from worry, but his dick was in excellent shape.

He had no qualms about going to see a doctor about it. So yesterday he'd been to the urology department of Irabu General Hospital, which was located halfway between his home and the office.

The young doctor who examined him was sure it must be the result of an overdose of Viagra. Even when Tetsuya said he never took Viagra, the doctor came back at him with a far-fetched scenario that involved somebody slipping the stuff into his drink, when he'd had one too many. It was just too implausible. Recently Tetsuya had been getting himself a ready-made meal from the convenience store and washing it down with a bottle of green tea. That was his evening meal.

When the doctor realized that it had nothing to do with any medicine, he frowned solemnly and pulled out a Polaroid camera. "Not to worry, I won't take your face," he said brusquely and started snapping Tetsuya's crotch without even asking him if it was all right. Finally he gave Tetsuya a shot of sedatives as a stop-gap measure.

"Since the blood is being pumped down there continuously, there's a chance it could upset the autonomic nerves . . ." muttered the doctor to himself. "In a way it's the opposite of impotence. That means that it's not a problem of sexual function. Which means there's a strong possibility that it is the result of mental factors."

"Could I—would it be okay for me to pull my trousers up?"

"Oh, yeah. Go ahead," replied the doctor in a flat, indifferent voice. He was frantically scribbling notes on Tetsuya's medical chart. "You're having trouble sleeping at night, right? . . . Well, that's only to be expected. And you've lost your appetite as well? . . . Right, I see. So, emotionally speaking, this must all be quite a trial for you," said the doctor, gazing off into space. He scratched his head with his pen and looked at Tetsuya. "How about giving our neurology department a go?"

Tetsuya did not know what to answer.

"It's here in the basement," the doctor explained jabbing a finger down toward the floor. "There's no harm at all in being examined from different viewpoints. The way they prescribe drugs down in neurology is different too. Yes, I think it's a good idea. Let's do it."

He was no longer looking Tetsuya in the eye. It felt to Tetsuya that the doctor had just gone and decided what to do without consulting him. He plainly wanted to offload a difficult patient onto someone else. Tetsuya sighed. But what did it really matter? The way things were now, he was quite happy to clutch at any straw that presented itself. Whoever this high priest of medical science might be, Tetsuya was ready to go see him.

He left the urology department and shuffled awkwardly down the hospital stairs to the basement. The atmosphere there was completely different: it smelled musty, like the backstage area of a theater. There were piles of cardboard boxes in the corridor, and—maybe he was imagining things?—the lighting seemed to be dimmer. He found a plaque that read "NEUROLOGY DEPARTMENT," and knocked uneasily on the door.

"Hello, hello! Come right in!!" The words rang out from behind the door in a high-pitched, somehow unhospital-like voice. Tetsuya timidly pushed open the door and limped in. A pasty-faced man in his early forties, as fat and round as an oil drum, sat there smiling.

"I saw your chart—'*Penis petrificatus,*' eh? So, I guess you're always ready for action!"

He grinned, exposing his pink gums. He gestured toward a stool, and Tetsuya sat down.

"Mustn't take a problem like this too seriously. I mean, think about it from the point of view of someone suffering from erectile dysfunction. They'd die of envy! I tell you, I've been having trouble getting it up recently myself. Ha-ha-ha."

Tetsuya scrutinized the doctor's face. His familiar tone was unexpected and bewildering. Tetsuya had never been to the neurology department before. Perhaps putting patients at their ease was all part of the treatment?

"Impotence is caused by a lack of self-confidence. That must mean that you, my dear Mr. Taguchi, are overflowing with it—positively 'cocksure'! *All right girls, come and get it! I'll make you writhe and moan!* Ha-ha-ha."

Tetsuya had no idea how to respond. He looked at the badge on the doctor's chest. "ICHIRO IRABU, DOCTOR OF NEUROLOGY," it said. Did that mean he was one of the owners of the hospital?

"Well, how about showing me, for starters."

Tetsuya dutifully pulled down his pants and his underwear. There was a ridiculously sexy nurse right beside him who looked him over without a trace of embarrassment. Their eyes met, but she remained expressionless.

"My, my," Irabu muttered. Then he leaned over and flicked Tetsuya's thing with his middle finger. Tetsuya could not help flinching. "You're not feeling anemic, are you?"

What was the point of the question?

"Look at it like this. The blood's all concentrated down there. I was thinking that maybe there's no blood going to your head."

"No, I don't think I feel anything like that . . ."

"Just a little joke. Ha-ha-ha." Irabu laughed heartily.

Tetsuya started to feel very uncomfortable. Here he was, feeling all vulnerable, and this guy was having a good laugh at his expense.

"Tell me," asked Irabu. "These dirty fantasies of yours—how long have you been having them?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Your mind—it's all right, you can confide in me—is overrun with lewd fantasies."

What the hell was he talking about?

"It's a common enough problem. There are people who are convinced they are being followed by someone, day in and day out; there are people who can't set foot outside their house because—God only knows why—they imagine the place will burn to the ground if they do. These are all simply different forms of obsessive-compulsive disorder. In your case, Mr. Taguchi, somewhere in your mind there's a woman giving you a good working over. Tee-hee-hee."

"There is *not*," Tetsuya spluttered indignantly. But Sayoko's face appeared fleetingly in his mind's eye.

"Look, it's all right. I can understand if you feel embarrassed."

"I already told you. That's not it." Tetsuya was furious

"Really?"

"No. It doesn't matter how much a person fantasizes about sex—getting saddled with a permanent erection like this is just not normal."

"Yes, I'll grant you that."

Irabu was examining Tetsuya's medical records with a puzzled look. He was silent for a moment, and then a serious expression came over his face. He rose from his chair and asked Tetsuya to stand up too. Tetsuya dubiously did as he was told.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Taguchi."

What was he apologizing for, Tetsuya wondered. And, at that very moment, a knee drove into his groin and Tetsuya realized he had just been kicked in the balls. The pain was overpowering. His vision went blurry, and he collapsed on the spot. He felt as though someone was chipping away at the inside of his skull with a hammer.

"What . . . what the . . .?" Tetsuya couldn't form a complete sentence.

"Well? Has that taken the lead out of your pencil? I just wanted to give you a bit of a shock." Irabu's voice was nonchalant.

"Why you—you!" A feeling of fury surged up inside Tetsuya. But his body still refused to do what he willed it to. He broke out all over in a greasy sweat.

"Since it was an external shock that made it go that way in the first place, I thought a similar sort of shock might make it go away."

Tetsuya was prepared to concede that there was a grain of sense in the theory. Or did he only think that, in all his rage and pain, because he had been brought so humiliatingly low?

Somehow he dragged himself to his feet and sat down on the stool. He withdrew his hands, leaving his crotch exposed. They both looked at it.

It was still rock-hard.

"So, it didn't work," said Irabu serenely.

"That was horrible—doing that to me all of a sudden like that!" Tetsuya's face flushed up as he protested.

"I couldn't very well give you advance warning, could I?" Irabu showed no sign of feeling even a shred of guilt. "And shock therapy—external or internal—is an effective method of treatment."

"But even so—"

"Look, it's exactly the same as hitting a TV when the picture's bad. Everybody knows that a lucky thwack might just dislodge whatever's jamming things and get the picture back to normal."

Shit! That sounded plausible—or did it?

"There's something jammed in your mind, Mr. Taguchi."

"What do you mean, 'something'?"

"An anxiety. A worry. Something that's eating at you."

As Irabu said this, Sayoko's face once again floated into Tetsuya's mind.

"Maybe you're embezzling company money."

"Huh?"

"Or maybe the cops are after you for a hit-and-run."

Tetsuya looked straight at Irabu's face. Flesh was bulging out from either side of his chin.

"No ideas?"

"Why the heck should I know?"

"The human body is full of more mysteries than the whole physical universe. You might want to try not taking things too seriously."

Tetsuya considered walking out. This doctor was definitely wacko.

"Anyway," said Irabu, "why don't we give you an injection?"

"I'd rather not." Tetsuya's eyes were calm as he declined. "They already gave me an injection in urology, but it didn't work."

"Hey, Mayumi!" Ignoring him, Irabu ordered the nurse to prepare the injection. "Don't be that way! It's good to get regular doses of medicine."

Tetsuya's eyes wandered over to the nurse Irabu had addressed as Mayumi. Her white uniform was wide open at the chest, and when she bent down her sumptuous cleavage was on display.

Why not give it a go? After all, the doctor in urology had said that the neurology department prescribed drugs differently.

As Tetsuya put his arm on the cushion, he caught sight of the nurse's demi-cup bra. His groin started to ache. When the needle slid into his flesh, Irabu brought his face up close to Tetsuya's, his nostrils twitching.

What is wrong with these two characters? The whole experience was so weird that he felt his sense of reality slipping away from him.

"Listen, you'll have to keep coming to the hospital for a while." As Irabu spoke, his belly quivered gently.

Why, he wasn't sure, but Tetsuya's will to resist had dwindled to nothing. He nodded silently. What did it matter, anyway? It didn't matter which hospital he went to—with his weird ailment of *Penis petrificatus*, he was sure to be treated like a freak.

Tetsuya got to the office late, sat down at his desk, and started working. He worked for a medium-sized trading company, and his present project was to create the sales strategy for a food manufacturer. As the project manager, he had plenty of responsibility. He started typing up the data from a consumer survey on his computer, but was unable to concentrate. His thoughts kept going down—to his groin.

Out of nowhere, Irabu's words floated into his mind. "There's something jammed in your mind, Mr. Taguchi." He didn't want to think about her, but still his thoughts turned to Sayoko. On reflection, he had to admit that, over the last three years, he had never *not* been thinking about Sayoko. At night when in bed, he'd often thought to himself that Sayoko—right at that moment—was probably making love with her new husband. He had made a point of avoiding the part of town where she lived.

He felt resentment toward her, but his feelings of self-loathing were even stronger. When they'd split up, he'd left her with a casual "See you around," without saying any of the things he had wanted to. He'd been so desperate to salvage some self-respect.

He grimaced as he felt a surge of pain in his groin.

"Is something wrong, Mr. Taguchi?" He looked up. Midori from Administration, whose desk was across from his, was looking over at him with concern.

"Uh-uh, I'm just fine." He cobbled together an air of composure.

"Why not take off your jacket? Look at you. You've even got the buttons done up."

"I get cold easily."

"That's funny. You're like one of those poor little anemic secretaries with bad circulation." She showed her white teeth in a grin.

Bad circulation? Good idea. Maybe he should buy a blanket to place over his lap. Tetsuya hunched forward, and the pain diminished a little.

The crucial thing was to conceal the telltale bulge in his trousers. If his colleagues found out about that, his life would be ruined.

Anxious thoughts swelled up inside him. He couldn't stop sighing.

TWO

The next day, Tetsuya returned to the neurology department of Irabu General Hospital. When he had caught sight of his erect penis in the morning, he was overwhelmed with infinite anxiety. He couldn't deal with the problem all by himself; he needed someone—it didn't matter who—to talk to.

This time he was injected as soon as he got there. He made a careful inspection of the cleavage of the nurse Irabu had addressed as Mayumi. Her bra was almost see-through. *This nurse seems to have her own unique tastes*, he thought.

"Have you got a hobby that could help you let off steam?" Irabu asked Tetsuya as he sat down opposite him.

"Don't think so."

"It's important for you to improve your blood flow. Sports would be good."

"No, it wouldn't. It hurts, you see."

Tetsuya put his hand on his groin. The truth was that, since the thing had become permanently erect, he didn't even like walking. Just walking up the stairs at the railway station was enough to send stabbing pains shooting through his body.

When he explained this to the doctor, Irabu sipped his tea and said, "Your body is probably not allowing the blood to circulate properly. A new circuit has been created, and it's carrying all the blood to the same one place. Your blood has basically forgotten the proper way of traveling around the body. It's like a scratched LP that keeps skipping and repeating the same bit of a song over and over again."

It sounded plausible to Tetsuya. "So, what should I do?"

"Giving you some kind of shock is the best thing—"

"—No way." Tetsuya rejected that plan out of hand.

"A psychological shock would be just as effective." Irabu was swilling the tea around in his mouth. Was he going to spit it out? But he swallowed it down in one great gulp. "What you need is an experience that will make it shrink back down."

"Yeah?" Tetsuya leaned forward eagerly.

"You could crash your car into a yakuza's Mercedes, then run off. That would probably be enough to scare the living daylights out of you."

Tetsuya sagged back in his chair. He wondered whether to change hospitals.

"Bungee jumping might be good too."

Tetsuya was reluctant to believe it. He was sure that sort of thing would only make the pain even worse.

"What about the rollercoaster at Disneyland? I can go with you, if you want."

Tetsuya did not bother to reply. He just sighed.

"And we could watch the Disney nighttime parade while we're at it!"

There was something tragic about having to go a theme park with a middle-aged man like Irabu.

The phone on the desk rang. "Excuse me for a second," Irabu said as he picked up the receiver. "What? Oh God, not you again."

He sounded aggressive. The voice of a woman was just barely audible at the other end. Irabu's face rapidly turned purple.

"I'm not going to pay you a penny, you filthy whore!" The veins stood out on his forehead as he started to bellow. "A thirty million yen settlement? You're out of your tiny little mind, woman! What grounds have you got to demand a sum like that? What grounds?"

Tetsuya looked on, stunned.

"What right do you have to ask for that much money after only three months of marriage? That's ten million per month. You'd never even let me fuck you properly, and you've still got the nerve to ask for that much! Christ almighty! Even the most popular girls in the high-end massage parlors don't earn that much. What's that? *I'm* a blot on *your* reputation? That's my line, baby. My mom is still angry with me for sullying the Irabu family's good name."

Irabu had stood up and his voice boomed out across the room.

"Just admit it. From the start, the only thing you wanted was my money. No, dear, I'll be suing *you*. I don't care how many expensive lawyers I have to hire, I'll make you sorry you ever tried to screw around with me."

Irabu yelled and roared for five minutes before slamming down the phone. "Damn fool woman!" He spat out the words, and his face glowed with anger.

Then, as with the flick of a switch, his voice was back to his best bedside manner. "Let me tell you something about it, Mr. Taguchi. All right?" Tetsuya almost tumbled off his stool in surprise. How could someone change that fast?

"The tart I was married to for all of five minutes turned out to be a total slut. And now she's trying to hit me for support."

Irabu was so close he actually put his hands on Tetsuya's knees. Tetsuya drew back automatically.

"My mother was nagging at me. You know, 'Ichiro, it really is high time you found yourself a wife.' So off I go to this special matchmaking party for doctors to meet 'girls from good families' and 'successful women from top companies.' And one girl comes on strong."

Would any girl in her right mind come onto you? The words almost popped out of Tetsuya's mouth.

"She's all for it, so off we go and got married—just like that, boom. As soon as we start living together, that's when she begins complaining that our tastes are different, we aren't interested in the same things, blah blah blah. And to top it all off, she doesn't get on with my mother. Three months later, she moves back in with her parents. Pretty selfish, don't you think?"

"Uh, yeah, right." There wasn't much Tetsuya could do but agree.

"'Too bad, but no point crying over spilled milk,' I'm thinking, when all of a sudden she hires a lawyer and says, 'I'm getting a divorce, so I want a settlement from you.' And it's thirty goddam million yen we're talking about here."

"Wow, that's terrible."

"Isn't it? And all I did wrong was make her dress up in a school uniform."

"Beg your pardon?"

"Dressing up. What's the big deal? Everybody does it."

"Hm. I'm not so sure abou—"

"And she complained about the stupidest little things. She told me not to put mayonnaise on my rice."

"Mayonnaise on your rice?"

"I fell into the clutches of a harpie, I tell you," Irabu said self-pityingly. "Mr. Taguchi, are you a single man?"

"Uh—yes, I am."

"Way to go. Nobody should get ever married," declared Irabu, scratching his great fat neck with a rasping sound. When their eyes met, he grinned, exposing his pale pink gums.

Tetsuya's eyes darted down to the nametag on his chest: "Doctor of Neurology, M.D., Ph.D.," it said. *They must give out degrees to just about anyone these days*, Tetsuya thought.

Irabu was the weirdest weirdo he'd ever met, that was for sure. Here was a man without a worry in the world. He did just what his impulses led him to do—yelling, shrieking, laughing. He was as carefree as a five-year-old child.

Tetsuya felt a certain envy. Unlike him, Irabu did not dwell on things obsessively.

His wife had walked out on him too. They had gone through the same experience. But why had the outcomes been so very different?

On the way to the office, Tetsuya dropped into a department store and bought a plaid lap blanket. The girls at work looked at him curiously as he spread it over his knees. "I won this as a prize," he fibbed. " So I might as well make use of it." He tried to laugh it off, but he felt ridiculous.

He started in on his work, but he could not stop thinking about Irabu. He tried to focus on his computer screen, but the events of the morning kept running through his mind.

"You filthy whore!" That was what Irabu had shouted into the phone. He would never have been able to say something like that. He always suppressed his feelings, locked them up deep inside.

When he had learned Sayoko was having an affair, his first emotion had been complete bewilderment. He had tried desperately to think why it might have happened.

"I'm sorry, there's someone else I'm in love with."

When his wife finally confessed, anger welled up inside him. But soon the anger was pushed aside by another feeling—of wanting to avoid making himself any more pitiful than he already was. He was too proud to let himself be labeled as "that guy whose wife had run off with someone else." Of course he was angry. "I don't want to see your face anymore," he had said, "so just hurry up and get out." But he was so desperate to salvage his pride that he never opened the floodgates of feeling. He'd lied to his friends and told them, "We'd just started to drift apart."

What he had really wanted to do was to kick her ass—and the guy's too. He wanted to curse her out and scream at her, "You filthy whore!" with the veins popping out on his forehead.

Maybe he was too worried about keeping up appearances: he was afraid of letting himself go.

The phone rang. It was an internal line. He picked it up. It was from a woman in sales.

"Are you ready with the results of the Suzuki Foods survey?"

"Isn't that due next week?"

"What! It's due *today*. I was planning to take it around right now."

"No, you're wrong. It was next week. I'm sure of it."

"No, it was not. I know that for a fact." There was no trace of friendliness in her voice as she contradicted him point-blank. "Then I would be grateful, Taguchi, if you could call them to say that we won't be going today, but will go next week instead."

"Huh? Me?"

"Thanks so much." The phone went dead before he had time to muster a reply.

This is just too much, he wailed to himself. *Why do I have to put up with such rudeness from a woman who's younger than me? If she had been a man, I'd have shouted her down.*

At that moment, he felt a stabbing pain in his groin. He involuntarily hunched forward.

Even now it wasn't too late. Should I call her back and let her have it? It was her mistake, so what right has she got to tell me to clear up the mess?

No, no. With his second thoughts, the hand he was stretching toward the phone stopped in midair. They needed to keep working together in the future, so it made sense to avoid any awkwardness. Women were such troublesome creatures in the long term. Make an enemy of one, and before you knew it all the women in the firm were against you.

Tetsuya decided to let it go. He rang the client. The project manager accepted his excuses, but he despised himself for agreeing to grovel.

The pain intensified. His penis was pushing up against the cloth of his trousers with a new level of urgency. I've got to get to the toilet, he thought, and sprang to his feet. The blanket slid to the floor. As if the whole thing had been carefully choreographed, Midori opposite looked up. Her eyes were on Tetsuya's crotch. *She had seen!*

Tetsuya fled in a panic. It hurt if he kept his back straight as he moved, so he walked bending forward from the waist. He could feel his colleagues' eyes on his back. His face was bathed in sweat.

As he waddled at high speed along the corridor, a couple of young women moved aside to let him pass. He suspected it was because his face was contorted into some bizarre expression.

He lurched into a toilet stall and lowered his trousers. His organ was red, congested with blood, and it almost touched his navel as it thrust upward. The pain got worse and worse. Tetsuya had to grit his teeth to bear it.

Why had he ended up with this appalling freak illness? With a problem like this, you couldn't talk to your friends about it. You couldn't even socialize with people properly until the damn thing had gone down.

The doctor had told him it was not incurable. But he had no guarantee that it was going to get better. What was going to happen to him, for God's sake? He wanted to shriek out loud, "Please, somebody help me!"

Then, as he gazed down at his penis with its protruding blue veins, a sudden insight came to him.

His penis was angry. It was angry at the fact that its owner never got angry.

Perhaps it was because he never let the blood rush to his head, that the blood had all migrated to his penis in this way. Because he never stood up for himself, his willy had finally decided to make a stand. The more he thought about it, the more convinced he was that he was right.

He had not been able to speak his mind to Sayoko. He had not even raised his voice to his wife—his wife who had cheated on him.

And just now the same thing had happened. At work, some uppity woman younger than he was had ridden roughshod all over him. He wasn't a wimp though: if he was dealing with a man, he could give as good as he got. He was overdoing the chivalry—he was just too kind and too reasonable toward women.

Maybe I should really let Sayoko have it. "You filthy whore!" he'd say, and give her a good slap to get the ball rolling. He had heard, from one of their friends, where she was living. And he knew that she was still working at the same company as before.

Sitting on the toilet seat, he heaved a great sigh. He wiped the sweat from his brow with his handkerchief.

But it was a little late now, he had to admit. Three years had gone by. Everyone would think he was out of his mind. If things took a bad turn, the police might even get involved. And if his friends and colleagues heard about it, he'd be a complete laughingstock.

He leaned back against the cistern and closed his eyes.

It was this habit of rationalizing that was the real problem. It was because he always suppressed his feelings that his penis had ended up in this state.

Somehow he was sure he was right. His *Penis petrificatus* was caused by his not letting his emotions spurt forth naturally.

He had made up his mind. He would go and have it out with Sayoko. He would shower her with abuse and then he would make her say she was sorry.

He had the right to do that. He wasn't the one who had done anything wrong.

As he stood up, a sharp flash of pain hit his crotch. He doubled up in agony and his forehead crashed against the wall. He saw stars. Tetsuya was determined to get an apology from her.

He left work at the end of the day without doing a minute of overtime. Sayoko lived in a trendy district. Situated on a private railway line, it was always being featured in the women's magazines.

Passing through the ticket barrier, Tetsuya was struck by the number of young women. There were no housewives with children to be seen. The women here were smartly dressed and they all seemed to be enjoying their time off after a day at work.

A mutual friend had told him that Sayoko had bought an apartment in a newly built block beside the park. Tetsuya got the policeman in the police box at the station to point the park out to him on a map. If he could locate a brand new building near there, then that would be Sayoko's lair.

He found it after walking for only about five minutes. It was a chic-looking mansion block with gray walls. You could see incandescent lamps casting their classy-looking glow in a number of the windows. Even from the outside, Tetsuya could see that the building's residents all lived very comfortably. If both of them were working, then of course they'd have plenty of money.

Tetsuya lived in a dilapidated old apartment building. He could buy his flat if he wanted—but he had never wanted to. In his present state, Tetsuya had no interest in planning for the future.

He checked the room number in the lobby. The names of two people were written on the nameplate. Sayoko's surname was no longer Taguchi. It was that of her new husband.

Tetsuya felt his heart constrict with self-pity.

Looking at the mailbox, he saw that there was a pile of mail inside. So she wasn't home yet. Tetsuya crossed over into the park and sat down on a bench that gave him a good view of the building.

He was willing to wait for hours if had to. He scrutinized the passersby.

When Sayoko appeared, he would confront her. "Hi there. It's been a long time," he'd say, cool as a cucumber. "There was a little something I forgot to do." Then he'd slap her. Sayoko would—naturally enough—be surprised; she'd probably be rendered speechless. And that was when he'd say it: "You filthy whore!"

He smoked one cigarette after another. Then he bought some fruit juice from a vending machine to soothe his parched throat.

Slapping was overdoing it a bit, though. That qualified as an act of violence. If the police got involved, there would be repercussions at work. Tetsuya had another sudden inspiration.

What about spitting at her? It wouldn't cause her any actual physical harm, but it was a highly effective way to express his contempt.

He closed his eyes lightly and took a deep breath.

No, maybe words would be enough after all. Sayoko was guilty enough as it was. The sight of him would be enough to discombobulate her. No, what he'd do instead was broaden the range of his insults. *You worm! You slut! You crappy cook! I kept my peace about it until today, but let me tell you, your miso soup was criminally salty!*

He looked at his watch. It was after eight.

He heard the sound of footsteps and looked toward them. On the far side of the street, he saw a woman's face illuminated by the streetlights. He recognized Sayoko immediately. But there was a man with her.

Tetsuya remembered. She and her husband worked in the same firm. Schedule permitting, it was only natural for them to come home together. Why hadn't he thought of that?

In a second, he had slid off the bench and hidden himself in the shadows under a tree. His heart was pounding, but he was emotionally detached. He peeped at their faces cautiously.

Sayoko passed by. He could feel the softness of her cheek, though she must have been a good thirty feet away from him. She had become beautiful—much more so than three years ago. Hers was the profile of a woman who was utterly content. She was chatting with her husband and smiling.

They made a good couple. This was the first time Tetsuya had seen her new husband, but he looked like a nice fellow.

They were holding hands.

As he looked at their intertwined fingers, Tetsuya came back to himself.

What on earth am I trying to do here? To come moaning to my ex-wife after three years have gone by! Ridiculous is too kind a word! Have I lost it? Have I gone around the bend?

The pair vanished into the apartment building.

Tetsuya was crushed by what he had seen—and by his own idiocy.

THREE

Dropping in to Irabu General Hospital was now part and parcel of his everyday routine. While he hoped that his daily injection would eventually have some effect, his real motivation was a desire to lessen his sense of isolation. Irabu was the only person he could confide in.

He had lied and told the office he was having infrared treatment for back pain. He thought this might justify his habit of walking about hunched forward—and the patently bizarre lap blanket.

The evening that he had seen Sayoko, he had dug out the photo of her that he had been keeping in the back of a drawer and burned it in the kitchen. His pretext for keeping it was that he was in it too, but now he had mustered the energy to destroy it.

It did not help to make him feel better. On the contrary, he felt even worse. Now that he knew what the man looked like, his imaginings had only become more vivid.

"Come on, Mr. Taguchi, let's do it. Let's go to Disneyland." Cheerful as ever, Irabu had no idea of the torment that Tetsuya was in.

"You know, Big Thunder Mountain could provide you with some really first-class shock therapy."

Tetsuya felt a strong urge to yell: "You mean *you* want to go, that's all!" On the other hand, there was something enviable about Irabu's complete lack of tact or common sense. He simply didn't care what other people thought about him. No doubt he slept like a baby every night of the week.

"All right then, how about the Hydropolis at Toshima Water Park?"

"You're telling me—me, in the state I'm in now—to wear a swimsuit?"

"Good point, good point. People might think you're some kind of pervert."

Tetsuya did not even bother to reply.

"By the way, Mr. Taguchi," said Irabu, as he scratched his head, sending thick flakes of dandruff floating to the floor. "I wanted to ask you a favor. I think I told you before that I was in the middle of negotiating a divorce. Do you think you could pick up my ex and take her off to a love hotel?"

Tetsuya frowned.

"Don't worry. It's not much of a challenge. She's an easy lay. But if you come onto her and say that you're a doctor, she'll follow as obediently as a dog—the bitch." He started to pick his nose. "Thing is, you see, I need to make sure I'll have the upper hand so I can go for an out-of-court settlement. I'll tail you and get some good photos of the two of you together."

"You're joking, right?" Tetsuya asked, sticking out his chin combatively.

"Uh-uh. No, I'm not." Irabu wiped his snotty fingers on his white lab coat. It's not easy for me to ask someone's help on a thing like this."

You seem to have no problem asking me, though, do you? Me, thought Tetsuya, a patient, to boot! Irabu brought out some photographs of the woman and showed them to him. Tetsuya just managed to stop himself blurting out that she looked good enough to be in Miss World. With a woman like her, you'd be grateful for the privilege of even a few short months together.

"Well, Mr. Taguchi, how about it?"

"No way." Tetsuya was shaking his head frantically.

"Stimulation is an essential part of life. Just going back and forth, back and forth from home to work and from work to home is too damn boring. The standard theory is that sick people need a complete rest. In your case, Mr. Taguchi, I think the opposite is true. The book I consulted said that stimulation and change of lifestyle are good for *Penis petrificatus*."

Did he seriously expect anyone to believe nonsense like that?

"I'll pay you for your trouble, of course. One hundred thousand yen for expenses, plus three hundred thousand yen upon completion. Oh, and you can have these consultations for nothing."

Was the man a real doctor?

Despite all Irabu's blandishments, Tetsuya somehow managed to say no. If Irabu had been in his shoes, Tetsuya thought, he wouldn't have let Sayoko off the hook so lightly. He'd probably have arranged for her new husband to be beaten up in the street.

The scene of the previous night was burned into his mind's eye. He had been having trouble sleeping to start with, but now sleep was even more elusive.

"I've got no choice, then. I'll go down to Ueno Park and hire myself an Iranian day laborer.

Tetsuya felt nothing but envy for the man's nerve.

When Tetsuya got to work, he covered his groin with his blanket, as always. He glanced across the desk and saw Midori exchanging meaningful looks with the other girls.

When they realized that Tetsuya was onto them they all looked away at once.

His face burned. People were definitely gossiping about him. No surprise there though. Recently, he tried to leave his seat as little as possible. When he did stand up, it was only after slipping his arms into the sleeves of his jacket and doing up all the buttons that he dared to raise his crotch above the level of the desk. He never had lunch with other people either. He would whiz out to buy a sandwich only when everyone else was safely out of the office.

He wondered if his permanent erection had been found out. His fingers trembled slightly as they tapped the keyboard. If he had been discovered, the shame would be too great: he would have to resign.

Should he tell the truth and "come out"? No. Stupid idea. That would be a shortcut to a lifetime of shame. Offices are places where gossip quickly turns to legend.

Tetsuya was called over by his section chief. He waddled over to his desk with the blanket still tucked around his middle.

"What the hell's this? Just back from Scotland, are we?"

"Ah, uh, no. Um . . ." Realizing how odd he must look, Tetsuya could only babble incoherently.

"Anyway, are you working on anything now that you can't put aside for tomorrow and the day after?"

"Not especially."

"Good. It's short notice, I know, but I want you to go on the hot-spring trip we do for our retail clients. Someone dropped out and I need a replacement."

"Did you say 'hot spring'?" Tetsuya started to feel dizzy.

"This is a crucial corporate entertainment event, so I can't trust it to any of the youngsters. All the department heads from my section are going. We need an experienced hand like you."

"Aah, I'm sorry, but I've got this terrible back pain, you see . . ." Tetsuya put his hand to his back and gave an exaggerated grimace.

"Well, that's fantastic. They say the water there is good for back pain. So have a good soak in the communal bath and while you're in there you can talk to all the purchasing managers. I'm expecting some new business out of this."

Everything went black. God only knows what might happen if he went on this hot spring trip in his present erect state! Just thinking about it was enough to make him feel faint. Worst of all, they were leaving tomorrow morning. There was no way to wriggle out of it.

Tetsuya went into an empty meeting room and telephoned Irabu without a second thought. He explained the situation.

"Why not come down with flu?" Irabu sounded very relaxed. "I can write you a doctor's note, if you need one."

"It won't work. I don't think the bosses would fall for it."

"All right then. How about dysentery? Or there's always Japanese encephalitis."

"Oh, come on, I'd get in the papers if I had that! Isn't there any way we can alleviate the symptoms? Isn't there a drug that could bring me down to at least half-mast?"

"No, don't think so." He heard the sound of a yawn at the other end of the line. "Why can't you just refuse? Say that you don't want to go."

"In a company the problem won't just vanish if I say, 'No, I don't want to go.' Things aren't as easy as that."

"Oh dear. Bit of pickle you're in, then."

Tetsuya put the phone down. He was a fool for getting in touch with Irabu.

His groin was starting to hurt again. Why had he been singled out to suffer like this? Things would be so much better if he could just be impotent instead.

The next morning came without his having been able to devise an escape strategy. As usual, he had not managed to catch a wink of sleep. Last night, he'd even thought about running away. He imagined that the majority of missing persons cases reported in Japan probably had silly causes like this.

Despite the pain, he decided to wear briefs instead of boxers. Under the briefs he wore an athletic supporter. He was of two minds about how to stow his tackle—pointing up, or pointing to the side—but finally opted for pointing up. The thing looked like the head of a baby kangaroo peeping out of its pouch, but what could he do? He did not want to force it into any awkward position.

They went to Izu in a magnificent touring bus. The first challenge to deal with was the golf. Tetsuya found himself unable to lie to the department head and say that his back hurt. "Our Taguchi here is a pretty good player," was how he ended up being introduced to the retailers. "Maybe we can get him to teach us some of his tricks, then!" the florid old men replied as they slapped him heartily on the back.

The first hole. Tetsuya clenched his teeth and teed off. Perhaps he put too much force into his swing, but the ball went shooting off into the trees. Immediately after he connected, he felt a sharp stab of pain.

His second shot landed in a bunker. A greasy sweat broke out all over him as he hunched forward and ran mincingly across the green. Just moving was enough to set his penis throbbing with pain.

The second hole. The third hole. The clients in Tetsuya's group started looking puzzled. Putts were the only shots he was able to hit properly. Tetsuya just hobbled frantically to and fro emitting a stream of apologies. He was too distraught to be able to make conversation.

"Mr. Taguchi, you should take more time over your shots."

"I just want to get this over with as fast as possible."

They were worried about him, but his reply had been brusque. This only worsened his sense of panic and a dismal mood descended on the whole party.

In the clubhouse after the first nine, the head of the department caught up with them and started teasing Tetsuya about his clothes.

"Hey, Taguchi, that's not polite. You should tuck in that shirt of yours."

Tetsuya had his polo shirt hanging outside his trousers. He had to wear it like this or the bulge of his genitals would be visible.

"But this is the fashion nowadays."

"Fashion? Golf is about tradition, not fashion."

"Well, I intend to keep my shirt exactly as it is."

The expression on the chief's face stiffened. Tetsuya headed for the next hole taking care not to catch his eye. He could not bring himself to worry about the chief; getting the hell out of there was the only thought in his head.

His final score was catastrophic. The clients he was looking after were barely talking and kept their distance from Tetsuya in the clubhouse. Clearly there was nothing very entertaining about his brand of corporate entertainment.

"Hey, Taguchi," hissed the department head into his ear after sidling over to him. "What do you think you're doing, ignoring the clients like this?"

"I'm, uh, tired."

"This is no goddam joke." The chief looked furious. "I'm expecting you to take proper care of them back at the inn, okay? The least you can do is scrub their backs in the bath."

"I'm—aah—starting to catch a cold."

"Well, that's a fucking shame, isn't it! If you don't do what you're here for, there'll be hell to pay when we get back to Tokyo."

Tetsuya wanted to run away. What would happen if he just hightailed it right now? Even if he managed to not be fired, he was sure to be punished severely. But so what? That was a still a hell of a lot better than having anyone catch sight of his periscope in the bath.

Why hadn't he just said no yesterday? Sure, the section chief would have looked daggers at him, but still he should have just turned him down pointblank. He was a procrastinator by nature, and that meant he was the one responsible for putting himself into all these tight spots.

And it was that same old procrastination thing that stopped him from running away and sent him right back to the inn. Everyone went off to their rooms, changed into the *yukata* cotton kimonos laid out in the rooms for this purpose, and went down to the big bath.

Tetsuya was sharing a large room with several clients and let them go down first. Once he was alone, he gingerly tried putting on the *yukata*. It was hopeless. His thing stood out like a gigantic sore thumb. Tetsuya gave up on the *yukata* and decided to put on the jeans he had brought with him. Then he mustered all his strength and tore the sleeve of the *yukata*. It was a painfully implausible excuse, but he had decided to say his had had a rip in it.

Right, the next problem to deal with was the bath itself. Getting into the common bath was simply out of the question. He could not be naked with other men. So what should he do?

The phone rang and he picked up. It was the department chief.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? Get down here right now. Your clients are the only ones that nobody's taking care of. Yoshida and Yamamoto are washing the backs of the people they've been assigned to. Are you doing this on purpose to embarrass me?"

"I'll be right down," Tetsuya replied in a quavering voice.

This was the worst spot he'd ever been in his whole life.

Wetting his bed as a child at summer camp had been nothing compared to this. He had just burst into tears and they had let him off.

He limped awkwardly along the corridor. He was pale and bloodless (except one place).

He was waiting for the elevator when, glancing off to the side, he noticed a red button. It was the emergency alarm.

His heart started beating faster. Should he push it? It would mean an end to his present difficulties.

His fingers snaked out as if under someone else's control. Next thing he knew, he had ripped the plastic cover off and was pressing the button.

The piercing sound of an alarm bell rang throughout the inn. Tetsuya dashed off as if shot out of a catapult. He charged down the stairs. He had forgotten all about the pain in his groin and was shrieking "Fire! Fire!" as loud as he could.

Now he knew how criminals felt when they had to commit a serious crime to cover up an insignificant lie.

The whole corporate jaunt had ended in disaster. Frightened by the alarm, the clients had rushed outside without getting dressed, where their middle-aged nakedness was exposed to rubberneckers and random passersby. But even Tetsuya's decision to yell "Fire!" didn't work out in the end. The inn had quickly phoned the emergency services to report a fire, and a number of fire engines had raced to the scene.

The staff of the inn fell all over themselves apologizing to the firemen and the guests. No effort was made to find the culprit. The inn staff had guessed that the whole thing was the work of one of their guests, so they did not want to make any trouble.

Tetsuya mingled with the crowd with the most innocent expression on his face. He realized something about the criminal mind: there's just about no end to the dissembling a man will do in the effort to conceal his crime.

When the excitement died down, everyone went back to the bath. By that stage, the department chief had forgotten all about Tetsuya and did not say a word to him. Tetsuya went to his room and smoked a cigarette.

Dinner, which got underway an hour late, was so-so. It livened up considerably when everyone had had a certain amount to drink and the high-pitched voices of the geisha girls echoed around the banquet hall.

Tetsuya went around filling the glasses of the clients. He was careful not to catch the eye of the department chief. He knew that his performance evaluation would suffer but at this stage he did not really care. Everything else paled beside his anxiety over his groin.

He asked the clients what they planned do for after-dinner entertainment, and was dryly informed that they would take care of it themselves. Tetsuya bowed and asked them to send the bill round to him.

He went to bed before everyone else. When he lay down and looked down at his crotch, the head of his John Thomas was peeping out of his pants.

"We've been through a lot together, you and I," he found himself saying.

In the worst-case scenario, he could always run off to Morocco. Half-joke it may have been, but the thought did nonetheless cross his mind.

FOUR

The office had become a distinctly uncomfortable place.

In part because Tetsuya avoided socializing with them, his colleagues had all started to be suspicious of him. People he'd been friendly with since he first joined the company expressed their concern: "Everyone's talking about you. They say you've changed." Midori and the other girls became cold and standoffish. They began to ignore him completely.

The days went by, with Tetsuya alternating between resignation and irritation. In the evening, he would not turn on the television. Instead he would lie in bed, gazing at his erect organ until he began to feel, "So what? I couldn't care less." He had decided to accept this as his destiny and live with it as best he could.

But when morning came he would plummet into depression. He was still only thirty-five. In the future, he wanted to fall in love, get married, have children. There was nothing strange about making plans like that at his age. But now he'd got this freak illness, and he was miserable. He was tormented by such acute pangs of loneliness that he wanted to cry out.

The previous evening he had got a phone call from an old friend. She hadn't called for any special reason, she said; she just wanted to catch up on his news.

"So, Tetchan," she said, calling him by his childhood nickname, "you don't plan to remarry?"

"Being single's so much more comfortable," replied Tetsuya with contrived jauntiness. "I've had it with marriage."

"Sayoko's very well, you know."

"Is she?" He tried to sound indifferent.

"Did you know that she's pregnant? Still only in the third month."

Tetsuya grunted.

"Maybe you didn't want to know that?"

"No, no. It's not like that"

"I'll be seeing her soon. Any message you'd like me to give her?"

"Don't think so."

Yes, as a matter of fact, I do have a message. You filthy whore! Of course, Tetsuya said nothing and hung up the phone.

Why did this news have to come now, just when he was trying to forget her? And to top it all off, she was pregnant—even though when they'd been together she'd always said, "But I'm still enjoying my work too much."

Tetsuya did not have the slightest scrap of good news of his own.

The more uncomfortable life at the office became, the more essential were his visits to the hospital. Tetsuya even missed Irabu on the days when the hospital was shut. Yes, Irabu was an eccentric man, but it was that eccentricity that was Tetsuya's salvation. Maybe, he mused, fools and freaks had some sort of healing effect. He started thinking that if things got too bad, perhaps he should abandon all common sense himself.

Today, as he went down the hospital stairs, he heard the voices of a man and a woman locked in a loud argument. They came from the consulting room of the neurology department.

Going up to the door, Tetsuya recognized the man's voice as Irabu's. The two of them were yelling abuse at one another. He hesitated—should he go in or not? Perhaps Irabu was having a fight with a female patient.

It was quite possible. This, after all, was a man who had suddenly kneed him in the balls. He heard the sound of breaking glass. He grabbed hold of the doorknob. He could not stay out of this.

Pushing open the door, he discovered Irabu and a young woman flinging things at each other. Something came hurtling toward him, and he ducked instinctively. Pivoting, he saw a syringe shatter against the wall behind him.

"Ugly bitch!" bellowed Irabu. "I'll sue you for fraud!"

"Sure you will, you pervert! And I'll sue you right back for emotionally traumatizing your wife!"

Tetsuya looked at the woman. So, was this Irabu's ex-wife who'd come to demand her settlement? Both of them were red in the face.

He pushed his way between them. "Doctor, you mustn't fight like this. You have to calm down."

"Out of my way, Taguchi!"

"Who the hell are you? What do you think you're doing butting in like this? It's none of your goddam business!"

Irabu, who was a giant of a man, brushed Tetsuya to one side. Tetsuya lost his footing and, after getting a further shove from the ex-wife for good measure, crash-landed heavily on his backside.

"I know about all your lies. I hired a private detective to check up on you. All that stuff about you having worked in a bank and now helping out at home—you were good, I have to give you that! In fact you were working in a topless joint in Kinshicho; and before that you'd been a massage girl in Kameido; and before that you'd been fucking for a living over in Koiwa. I found it all out. Everything. Oh, a slut like you, you had quite the nerve, gate-crashing a respectable doctors' party."

As Irabu ranted on, the girl's lips started trembling. Tetsuya examined her a little more carefully: with garish make-up plastered all over her face, she looked every inch a woman who made her living in the sleazy world of the night. She did not look a bit like the photograph Irabu had shown him.

"Shut up, you fat fuck! You promised to buy me all sorts of clothes—and what did you ever get for me? School uniforms, bloomers, crap like that! Then it's like, 'Ooh, wear this one tonight for me.' You've got to be kidding. Then to make it worse, you'll do absolutely anything your mommy tells you to do. 'Ichiro, you don't want to get a chill in your tummy, so always remember to wear your tummy band.' A middle-aged man in a Mickey Mouse stomach band! Jesus! How pathetic is that! You pedophile mama's-boy piece of shit, you!"

Now Irabu was the one grinding his teeth in fury. His heavy, fleshy cheeks were quivering.

Tetsuya, still flat on his bottom on the floor, just looked on stupefied as the fight developed.

These two were cut from the same cloth. He didn't feel like taking sides with either of them.

"Since when have you been so pure, you sleep-around slut? Oh yes, the Iranian—he told me."

"Well, what are you doing hiring Iranians to do your dirty work, anyway? Coward! You want to fight with me, then do it yourself."

Tetsuya was startled. Did that mean Irabu really had gone and hired an Iranian in Ueno Park?

"You've got silicone tits! I'm a doctor, remember. You can't pull the wool over my eyes."

"Well, doc, I think your smelly foreskin is a more urgent problem. Deal with that first!"

"You snore like a pig, you bitch! Botched plastic surgery on your nose, I bet."

"You're a fine one to talk with BO like yours! Never heard of deodorant?"

And sure enough, they soon got physical again and started pulling each other's hair.

"Please, no violence." Tetsuya tried again to intervene.

"Bitch! Tart! Get out of here!"

"You fat pig! Get a move on and pay me the fucking money, limp dick!"

Tetsuya glanced to one side. At some point, the nurse had come into the room. She was sitting comfortably in a chair with a magazine open on her knees.

"Nurse, please. Help me separate them."

"Why bother?" She raised her head lazily. "Just let 'em get on with it." She uncrossed and recrossed her legs, revealing a luscious pair of thighs.

"Why you—"

They were scratching each other's faces—and Tetsuya's too. He felt their hot breath on his face. Spit was flying all over.

"Will the two of you please calm down," he protested, and was kicked and elbowed for his pains.

He wasn't sure why, but it didn't seem to hurt much. In the midst of the chaos, Tetsuya's thoughts were running along a quite different channel.

These people were free. Free from reason. Free from the rules of the world at large. That was how they lived their lives—as animals first, humans second.

If he were in the same situation, reflected Tetsuya, he wouldn't be so open about showing his feelings. He lacked the ability to show anger.

And that was the reason why his penis was angry for him. The thing was exploding with rage.

Tetsuya had returned to his obsession. He was ill like this because he had run away from the wreckage of his personal life. But for a human being to live in a truly human way, you had to experience the slaughter of the emotional battlefield, not run away from it.

Right now, though he was only an observer, he had a keen sense of being genuinely alive.

Irabu and the woman grappled for five minutes or so. "I'll put it up on the Internet that the son of the owner of this hospital is a raging pervert," was her parting shot as she left the room.

"Not before I put the details of your sordid little life up there first," retorted Irabu, giving as good as he got.

Irabu finally settled down only after Tetsuya had dabbed his face and arms with mercurochrome.

"That woman—a horrible piece of work. Worked in a topless joint, the detective said. Only after my money. A gold-digger."

Don't tell me you're surprised. How could a fat bugger like you expect to find a wife otherwise? Naturally Tetsuya did not verbalize his thoughts.

"Yes, Mr. Taguchi, marriage is not a thing to undertake lightly."

"Actually, I was married myself, but I got divorced three years ago."

"Hmm. Really?"

"My wife had an affair and finally—to cut a long story short—she left me."

"Irritating. And did she get any sort of settlement off you?"

"No, not a single yen." Tetsuya gave a small shake of his head. "Maybe I was just trying to seem as though I didn't care. But I have my regrets. It's not the money, but I still wish I'd yelled at her, 'You filthy whore!'"

"And this ex-wife of yours, where is she now?"

"In Tokyo. She lives quite close by."

"Shall we pay her a visit? I'll go with you."

Tetsuya looked at Irabu. His face wore its usual easygoing expression.

"At this time of day, she'll be at work."

"Well, let's go to her office, then. I've got something I want to say to her."

"We don't want to be hasty. Perhaps another day would be better?"

"No, no, no. You've got to act on the impulse. People who say they'll get around to doing something 'soon' or 'in a little while,' they never do it in the end."

Tetsuya was pretty sure that Irabu was talking about him. "But Doctor, why do you want to come with me?"

"Well, what with you intervening in my little fight just now, I feel that I haven't done quite as much shouting as I'd have liked." Tetsuya almost fell off his chair in surprise. Irabu continued, "Right now, as far as I'm concerned, all women are my enemies." He sprang to his feet. "Okay then, off we go."

"But Doctor, what about your other appointments?"

"Mayumi, I'll be taking the rest of the day off. Cancel my afternoon appointments."

"There aren't any," mumbled the nurse, not bothering to look up from her magazine.

Tetsuya was seized by the arm and led out of the hospital. He didn't resist. Somewhere in his heart he knew that this was what he wanted to do. After a three-year delay, he wanted to run amok on his personal emotional battlefield. What did it matter? His life was a mess anyway.

They clambered into Irabu's Porsche in the parking lot behind the hospital. The engine emitted a throaty roar.

Tetsuya clenched his fists in the passenger seat. *Who gives a damn?*

When they reached Sayoko's office they made a beeline for the reception desk.

"I'll call her down. Having the title of 'Doctor' is pretty handy. I'll give her a bit of a shock—say that dysentery has broken out in her neighborhood."

Tetsuya felt a surge of gratitude.

He waited in the lobby with Irabu. And sure enough his heart started beating faster. It was three years since he'd last seen Sayoko face-to-face. But she would be more flustered than him. She'd probably go all pale; be so surprised she couldn't even get a word out. Before long she appeared. As soon as she caught sight of Tetsuya, her head jerked back, and she stopped in her tracks.

She stood still for a few seconds, then resumed walking toward them. A quiet smile played about her lips.

"Somehow or other I thought it might be you. I don't know anyone from any hospital."

Right, I'm going to say it. I don't care if people are watching. If I give her a piece of my mind here at her work, it'll cause her that much more trouble.

"You were round at my place a few days ago, weren't you, Tetchan?"

Tetsuya said nothing.

"I recognized you right away. My husband was there, so I pretended not to notice. You were over in the park watching us."

So she'd spotted him! His face burned.

"What did you want? I suppose you stayed away because my husband was with me?"

"Well, um, it's more . . ." Tetsuya was mumbling incoherently.

"I was worried about that myself. But that reminds me—Yumi rang you a while back, didn't she? That was because I asked her to. I thought she might be able to find out if you had any news."

Tetsuya was sweating. He couldn't bring himself to look her in the eye.

"To be honest, Tetchan, I was hoping to hear you were going to remarry. I thought perhaps that's what you'd come to tell me," said Sayoko in a gentle voice. "I still feel awful about the way I treated you, Tetchan. I keep thinking how unfair it is just for me to be happy. Of course, I know you'll never be able to forgive me, Tetchan, but if you remarried, you see, in a way it'd help me feel better too. . . ."

It was Tetsuya who ended up with the blood draining from his cheeks. He was probably as white as a sheet.

“So, why are you here?”

“Go on, Taguchi, say it!” Irabu whispered into his ear. “‘You filthy whore! You filthy whore!”

“Oh, and who’s this? A friend of yours, Tetchan?”

“Uh, not exactly, he’s . . .” Tetsuya was awash in sweat.

“Go on,” Irabu urged him. “Whack her one!”

“Nothing important really. I heard you were going to have a baby, so I just thought I’d drop around to congratulate you.”

“You know! I suppose Yumi told you?”

“Bye then. Don’t worry, I won’t come again.”

He turned around and grabbed Irabu’s arm.

“So, Mr. Taguchi, you’re not going to say anything after all,” sneered Irabu, his eyes bulging with anger. Taguchi fled, dragging Irabu with him.

Tetsuya felt like bursting into tears. Surely there was no one in the whole world as miserable as him.

Perhaps dying was the best thing for him to do. Death would probably solve his penis problems into the bargain.

He sighed and felt even more sorry for himself. He wanted to dig a hole and hide in it for the rest of his life.

Tetsuya put in a request for a week off work, and shut himself up in his flat.

He just lay in bed. He stopped going to the hospital and had his meals delivered to his door.

His penis was as erect as ever. Christ, how many days had the thing been like that? Tetsuya could not bring himself to count.

He did not read any books, nor did he watch television. He just stared vacantly at the ceiling.

On the third day, he got a phone call came from the Irabu General Hospital. It wasn’t Irabu, but the young doctor of urology he had gone to see first.

"Ah, Mr. Taguchi, it's been a while. And how is our *Penis petrificatus*?"

Tetsuya felt a little heartened by the idea that there was someone out there who still cared about him.

"I'm afraid it's not better yet," he replied.

"Oh, that's wonderful news!—Oh, I am so sorry, how tactless of me. I've been doing a stint at Irabu General Hospital. Actually, though, I'm on the staff of the University Hospital. I showed your medical chart and the photographs I took to my faculty advisor there, and he very much wants to examine you. So I was wondering if you might be able to come to the University Hospital?"

Tetsuya said he would go. His hopes were not high, but he was not prepared to rule out the possibility he might get lucky.

He made his way to the old brick University Hospital building, where the young doctor and his advisor came out to greet him. The older man's hair was streaked with gray, and he looked sincere. *Could this be my lucky day?* Tetsuya got his hopes up ever so slightly.

They led Tetsuya into a research room and made him lie down on a couch. He took down his trousers.

"Ah-ha, absolutely no doubt about this. A definite case of *Penis petrificatus*," said the older doctor to the younger one, who was setting up a video camera. "I've been in the medical profession for forty years, and this is the first case of it I've ever seen. Tell me," he asked Tetsuya, "does it hurt?"

"Very badly if you put any pressure on it. That's why I can't wear briefs."

"Can you have sex?"

"I don't know. I haven't had sex since it got like this. But I know I can masturbate."

The professor asked his questions and Tetsuya dutifully replied.

At that moment, the door opened. A white-coated group of what looked like medical students came in. There were quite a few girls among them.

"Ah, so you're all here? This is *Penis petrificatus*. It's a highly unusual condition. You're very fortunate to have the chance to see a case of it even once in your careers, so take a good long look."

Huh? Tetsuya looked up. As they clutched their medical notepads, the medical students were obediently taking notes.

"Professor, may I measure it?"

"An excellent idea. Go right ahead."

The students measured its length and its circumference with a tape measure. Tetsuya was bewildered. What the hell was going on here?

After the students had taken a good look at him, Tetsuya was allowed down from the couch. The students all filed out of the room.

"Thank you for taking the trouble to come and visit us," said the older professor, offering him an envelope. "This is for your taxi fare."

Tetsuya did not understand what was going on. "But what about my examination?"

"Well, that was it."

"You're not going to cure me then?"

"Performing a surgical procedure is one option available to us." The professor stroked his chin sagely. "Now, if this were a potentially fatal condition, my advice would be different, but symptoms of the sort you have don't cause any real physical harm. That means that no doctor would want to take the risk of putting you under the knife."

"So what was today all about then?"

"We just wanted to show you to the students for their future reference," chimed in the young doctor cheerily. "Don't worry, Mr. Taguchi. You'll be right as rain in no time."

Tetsuya felt every drop of blood in his body surge up to his head. His temples throbbed.

"What the *fuck* do you think you're doing?" Tetsuya's voice shook with sudden and intense anger. "Turning someone's sickness into a freak show like that. I may be your patient, but that doesn't give you the right to make a damn fool out of me." His voice grew louder, and he grabbed a stool that was nearby.

"Please, Mr. Taguchi, calm down."

"Shut up! Every goddam person in the whole goddam world is laughing at me. You made a big mistake if you thought I was going to just be quiet and suck it up forever."

He raised the stool over his head and swung it against the wall with a great crash.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Tetsuya then knocked over the examination couch. It hit the front of a cabinet and shattered the glass. A box of scalpels clattered down to the floor.

"Please, stop this right now!"

"Shut your trap! And if you don't want to get hurt, get the hell out of my way!"

Tetsuya kicked any medical equipment that was within range, sending it skidding all over the place. The IV stand fell over and the X-ray machine went flying. He flung the computer straight through the glass of the window, into the center courtyard.

"Quick," screamed the older professor. "Call the police!"

"Go ahead and call them. You can call the bloody riot squad for all I care." The blood was pumping hotly around Tetsuya's whole body.

The police kept him in custody for two days. He got a suspended sentence on the charge of damage to property, and everything else was taken care off by an out-of-court settlement with the hospital.

They said they would accept compensation equal to half the value of the damaged equipment. They agreed to this compromise because the professors had turned a patient into a sideshow.

Tetsuya asked Irabu to come get him at the police station

It was a choice motivated more by desperation than anything else: he did not want his parents to find out, and he was even more anxious to keep the episode a secret from his colleagues at work.

"So, Mr. Taguchi, seems you really let your hair down, eh?" Irabu was just the same as ever when he came to pick him up. The instant he caught sight of Tetsuya he grinned, exposing his baby-pink gums. Had Irabu been a woman, Tetsuya was quite sure he'd have leapt into his arms.

When Tetsuya left the police station he was striding—almost skipping.

His penis had shrunk!

The police had taken him away from the University Hospital. But it was when he went into the interrogation room that—even in his overexcited state—he was aware of feeling somehow different.

The odd sensation down in his crotch had vanished. He shoved a hand into his trousers and let out a whoop of joy. One of the police had sternly told him to "Keep it quiet in there, son," but he just could not stop grinning. Finally, at long, long last, he was free from the curse of the permanent erection.

Perhaps having an emotional outburst like that had been a good thing. Maybe his own hypothesis about his condition had been right after all. In the car he mentioned it to Irabu, who put it all down to "autosuggestion."

"You convinced yourself that 'If I do X, then it'll get better.' You did X and—lo and behold!—it went and got better. It's the same as the placebo effect. Yes, the human body is a weird and wonderful thing."

Tetsuya did not really care. It had got better: that was all that mattered.

"Well, since your problem has subsided," said Irabu. "There's no reason for us not to go to the Hydropolis at Toshima Water Park."

Tetsuya did not want to go.

"I'd prefer it, Doctor, if you invited me along to one of your doctors' dating parties. I'll pretend to be a doctor. Maybe I can get lucky."

"No problem at all. I'll fix you up a hospital I.D."

Tetsuya looked at Irabu beside him. *He was a fine physician after all!*

There was something comforting about the rumble of the Porsche's engine in his eardrums.

Trade Show Model

ONE

"Why not see what a neurologist has to say about it?"

They were in a café on their way home from a job when Atsuko, another trade show model who worked for the same agency, tentatively made her suggestion.

Hiromi Yasukawa looked up and stared at her.

"I'm not saying that I think you're crazy or anything. This sort of thing could happen to anybody." Atsuko squeezed out a desperate smile, and the words spilled out faster. "I'm sure you're just tired. Get some medicine, take two or three weeks off, and I'm sure you'll be back to your old self."

"It's not that simple," answered Hiromi with a sigh. She pushed her teacup to one side, crooked her elbow, and leaned her cheek on her hand.

"You should at least try it. When Sato, the voice actor, had a nervous breakdown—"

"*That is not what's happening to me,*" Hiromi declared, emphasizing every word.

Atsuko sighed and lapsed into silence. Then she put the straw to her lips and started drinking her lemon squash.

Hiromi hadn't been feeling well since last month. Her whole body was tired, and she could not sleep at night. Her breathing was labored, and she had sudden flashes of pain in her chest.

She knew what was causing it: somebody was following her.

She first realized what was going on one night when she was heading home on the last train, a bit tipsy after a post-job party that had gone on too late. She had run out of the restaurant to escape the heavy-handed flirting of the advertising agency rep, who was married with children. That was why she had not managed to get the taxi coupon that would have been handed out at the end of the evening.

The dirty old man—putting his hand round her waist like that! Hiromi was hanging onto a strap in the subway car and cursing him internally, when she sensed someone looking at her from somewhere behind her.

She immediately spun around. Nobody seemed to be looking.

Just my imagination, she thought to herself and turned back around. But a few seconds later, she had the same sense of being looked at.

This time she was more subtle and turned just her head. Everything in the car seemed quite normal. Glum-looking businessmen were all staring straight ahead with expressionless faces. Nonetheless, it wasn't long before she again felt someone's eyes upon her.

She was accustomed to being looked at. She used to work as a model for an auto racing team. Her face and figure were enough to make any man turn around for a better look.

But that evening there was something different about the looks being directed at her. They came—she knew they did—from lecherous, gloating eyes.

It gave her the creeps. She had been followed more times than she could count by nerdy types—those camera-freaks who made the classic mistake of thinking that the models were directing their smiles at them personally.

After getting off at her station, she half-ran back home. Rushing up to her flat, she took a careful look down at the street from a crack between the curtains. She was relieved to see no one there.

But two or three days later, she again felt that someone was watching her. And this time the feeling continued day and night. Her own neighborhood, or wherever she went for a job—it made no difference. The instant Hiromi stepped outside her front door, the same someone would mysteriously make his presence felt.

Hiromi was frightened and asked Atsuko for advice. Atsuko was terribly worried for her and urged her to go to the police. So Hiromi ended up going down to the local police station with Atsuko for back-up.

The woman officer in charge of dealing with stalkers asked Hiromi to describe the appearance of the man in question. "I don't know," was her reply. The thing was, the guy always kept out of sight.

"The minute I leave my house I can feel him looking at me," she went on. "He's watching me from somewhere—where, I don't know—every minute of the day."

After Hiromi had been making claims of this sort for half an hour, the policewoman and Atsuko were both looking rather anxious. "Please come back in after you've gotten a good look at him," the policewoman said, slipping off into the bowels of the station. Atsuko, meanwhile, seemed to be sunk in thought.

It was a black moment when Hiromi realized that neither of them believed her.

But she kept on giving Atsuko bulletins about what was happening to her. Atsuko nodded as if to say, "Yes, yes, I understand," but she didn't look as if she really believed her. In fact, she had started to ask all kinds of questions about Hiromi's health.

Apparently Atsuko had begun thinking she was crazy. *And you call yourself my friend!* Hiromi thought furiously.

As she got more and more depressed, she became unable to eat. Her weight dropped by three kilograms. As a diet it was certainly effective, but she was far from happy about it.

"Maybe for the time being you should get the doctor to prescribe you some antidepressants," urged Atsuko. "At least then you'll be able to get some sleep."

Hiromi said nothing.

"The most important thing is to get your health back first."

Hiromi saw that she was right about that. But going to see a neurologist was not something she was anxious to do. That would mean admitting there was something wrong with her. She said goodbye to Atsuko and caught a train. Again, she felt someone's eyes all over her.

Pervert freak! Who the hell are you? Some wimpy little geek, I bet. I'm way out of your league, baby, way out of your league, she thought. It had been going on for over a month now and she was very tempted to shout it out.

Stifling her anger, she looked out of the window. A billboard reading "IRABU GENERAL HOSPITAL" caught her eye. The building itself was white and clean-looking.

A general hospital was sure to have a neurology department.

She wondered absentmindedly whether a hospital would be easier to get into than a smaller clinic specializing in neurology. She'd think about it overnight. If there was a drug that could help her to sleep, she wanted that drug, and she wanted it badly.

Hiromi hung heavily onto the strap and gave a deep sigh.

The neurology department of Irabu General Hospital was a single room down in the basement.

Hiromi made up her mind to go there when she woke up the next morning, looked in the mirror, and found that her skin had broken out in a rash. If things went on this way, she wouldn't be able to work at all! For Hiromi, her looks were her livelihood.

She knocked on the door and was surprised to hear a cheery and strangely high-pitched voice trilling, "Hello, hello! Come right in!"

"Good morning," she said as she went in. What appeared to be the doctor—a fat, middle-aged man—sat lounging on a big armchair.

"Yuck!" she muttered under her breath. Great fat pasty men were the kind she loathed above all others. Even worse, there were flakes of dandruff in his uncombed hair. "ICHIRO IRABU, DOCTOR OF NEUROLOGY," read the nameplate on his chest.

"Reception sent down your details. You're Hiromi Yasukawa, right? So, I hear you're having trouble sleeping?"

As he spoke, he grinned, exposing his baby-pink gums. Hiromi lowered herself into a chair, looking down at the floor so that she wouldn't have to look at him.

"You're twenty-four years old, and you're an actress and a model. What sort of work is it that you are doing exactly?"

"Oh, I work as an assistant presenter on television, model for magazines—things like that."

She had done such jobs in the past, but the truth was she spent most of her time working as a trade show model.

"Fabulous. Tell me next time you're going to be on T.V. and I'll watch. Hee-hee-hee!"

There was something creepy about the man's laugh. Hiromi felt a slight chill run down her spine.

"Well, then, how about a nice injection?"

"Pardon?" said Hiromi with a frown.

"An injection. I'll give you one to help you relax."

"But aren't you even going to ask me about my symptoms?"

"Oh, we'll deal with that afterwards. Mayumi!" Irabu summoned the nurse, who quickly prepared the injection. Hiromi put her left arm on the cushioned support.

The nurse who was apparently called Mayumi leaned forward, holding the syringe. One of her thighs emerged from the slit in the skirt of her white uniform. Their eyes met, and Mayumi grinned at her provocatively.

So you want to compete with me? You may be pretty, thought Hiromi, *but you're still just a nurse.*

She sensed someone right beside her and, turning, saw Irabu staring at her arm with the needle in it, a rapt expression on his face.

What the hell was going on at this crazy hospital? Hiromi felt a bit sick.

The injection over and done with, Hiromi once again found herself sitting opposite Irabu. She had a strange sense that he was sitting somewhat closer than before.

She could have kicked herself for coming in a miniskirt. She clamped her knees tight and pressed her hem down flat with her hand.

"And you are, of course, single, Hiromi?" Irabu asked with great relish.

"Uh, yes, I am." She felt goose pimples rising on her skin. Why was he calling her by her first name?

"Well, so am I. Hee-hee-hee." Irabu scratched his head, and flakes of dandruff floated to the floor. Hiromi instinctively shrank away. "I'm due to inherit this hospital. I drive a Porsche, my blood type is type B, and I'm a Libra."

So the hell what? What did she care about him?

"I'm thirty-five, but don't look my age. Everyone thinks I'm younger."

Who was he kidding? He looked forty-five, at least.

"Ah—and what about my consultation?" asked Hiromi timidly.

"Good point! Mustn't forget to ask about you, must I?" He finally turned his attention to her file on his desk. "So, Hiromi, my love, why have you got this insomnia?"

Now she was "his love," was she? Hiromi felt like bursting into tears.

She pulled herself together and explained why she was feeling under the weather: someone was stalking her; the police wouldn't take her seriously; and even her friends thought she was imagining the whole thing.

She didn't like to talk about it, but she thought it best to be frank with the doctor, so gave him all the details.

"That's awful. There are some crazy people out there."

Tell me about it. Weirdoes like you, fatso.

"Maybe you could hire yourself a bodyguard for a while?"

Huh? So Irabu had believed her! A great sense of relief welled up inside her.

"I don't have the money for that."

"I could do it. For free. Tee-hee-hee."

Hiromi went limp. Of course she declined. She made up her mind to get out of there ASAP, and she reached for her handbag.

"Another technique would be to change your image," said Irabu, stroking his fleshy chin. "The other person has created an exaggerated, overly perfect image of you for himself. So what you should do is destroy that image."

Hiromi's extended hand stopped in midair.

"Let me give you an example. There was this Hollywood actress who was being followed everywhere by a stalker. And one day this stalker actually went around to her house. The actress—who didn't know it was him—answered the front door with no makeup on and in her house slippers. When the stalker saw that the star was older and shorter than he'd imagined, he cooled off and just went quietly on home."

Hiromi was listening, her hands back on her knees.

"In other words, the stalker was obsessed with the actress as she was up on the screen: in high heels and with her makeup perfectly applied. When he saw her as she really was, it was a massive anticlimax. So, Hiromi, love, you might think about going outside without putting on any makeup."

Hiromi revised her opinion of Irabu a little. The man was not a complete buffoon.

"Or you could make sure he sees you putting out the garbage in the morning, wearing an old track suit and giving your butt a good scratch."

"I think I could manage that."

Hiromi felt she had been shown a ray of light. That was the answer: she needed to disillusion him.

"While you're at it, you could scratch your crotch, with a cigarette hanging from the corner of your mouth."

That, thought Hiromi, was something she definitely would not be doing. But she believed in the basic idea—

"I'll need you to come back a few times. I'll be giving you injections to make you feel better."

Irabu smiled, treating her to another display of his gums. Become a regular patient here? The thought did not appeal, but she nodded her agreement.

He may a bit of a creep, she told herself, *but this still beats fretting about things by myself.* She definitely felt a little less anxious than she had yesterday. Maybe the simple act of confiding in someone lightened the burden of worry.

When she left, Irabu escorted her out to the corridor. "Off to work now, are you, Hiromi, love? Want me to drive you in my Porsche? Tee-hee-hee." He batted his eyes at her.

Hiromi's cheeks twitched in annoyance, but she managed to smile politely and refuse.

Bragging about a *Porsche*, for God's sake! she sneered to herself. I've already been in Ferraris and Mercedes—pretty much every smart car there is—thank you very much!

Emerging from the hospital, she immediately had the sensation that someone was watching her. After checking that there were no good-looking men in the vicinity, she spat a great gob of phlegm onto the pavement. A housewife who happened to be walking toward her gazed on in blank astonishment.

I'm doing this for a reason—a very good reason, she wanted to say.

TWO

She had a job at a video game trade show at the international exhibition hall tomorrow. She was going to be handing out brochures and explaining products at the booth of a manufacturer who had hired her through the agency. Part of her duties, of course, was to be photographed. They had issued her a deep crimson mini-dress. There was a zipper on the front for regulating the cleavage-exposure level.

The next morning, Hiromi went out with her normal makeup and clothes on. Her outfit was a miniskirt, a low-cut sweater, and high heels. She had meant to follow Irabu's suggestion about how to dress, but changed her mind after looking at herself in the mirror. Sure, the advertising company coordinators who showed up weren't all young and handsome, but if today's was, she'd hate herself if she'd gone in with no makeup and wearing frumpy, unsexy clothes. After all, you never knew when opportunity would come knocking. Once the job was over and done with, she stood a very good chance of being invited out to dinner.

She made up for it by picking her nose as she left the house. She had already sensed that there was someone there, so she kept her finger in for a good ten seconds as she glared around her.

The show was horrible. Pale fat men—the kind Hiromi detested most on earth—were swarming everywhere.

But Hiromi did not allow any trace of her feelings to show in her face. She stood next to the products and bestowed her smile freely upon all visitors. Her posture was already good, thanks to the body-shaping underwear she was wearing, but she arched her back and pushed out her chest. This was a habit she had gotten into from work. Sometimes she would assume her model's pose when she was just standing on the corner waiting for the light to change.

"Hey, Hiromi," whispered Atsuko as she came over. "The people from Midland-TV's *Tomorrow* are here—"

"Wow!"

"—and the people from *Treasure* too."

Treasure was a top-selling magazine for young men featuring photographs of starlets and models, and *Tomorrow* was an hour-long variety and celebrity news show.

The live performances and demo events were about to start.

The media were sure to turn out in force. As usual the photographers would be choosing the three best girls, and taking group shots of them.

On the pretext of restocking the piles of brochures, Hiromi went behind the set and checked on her makeup. It didn't look quite as good as usual, she realized with annoyance. It couldn't be helped: she pulled the zipper on her chest down another inch.

When she returned to her spot, she discovered that the camera freaks had beaten the media to it and had occupied the space right in front of the stage. *Bug off, you bunch of weirdos! I don't show this cleavage for the likes of you!* railed Hiromi internally, while flashing them a gleaming white smile.

But in fact she didn't really care who took her picture; she just adored having her picture taken.

Maybe it was because of the zipper, but the camera freaks' lenses were all trained on Hiromi. Flashes went off here and there. Shutters clicked busily.

Hiromi felt herself getting high on the sheer pleasure of being the center of attention. Looking down at the camera freaks from up on high, she struck a pose, thrusting out a leg to expose the top of her thigh.

All right, shall I be a nice girl and let you get a shot of my panties? I know it's me you'll be thinking of when you jerk off tonight. Hiromi felt even happier, as she reveled in the sense of her own power.

After a while she realized that the camera lenses had all started pointing at the person beside her. Looking around, she saw Emilin, a nineteen-year-old from the same agency, looking incredibly pleased with herself as the flashes went off for her.

Well, fuck you! Going and giving yourself a stage name when no one's even arranged for you to appear on TV yet. And don't think I don't know about you taping your boobs together to bulk up your bust!

Hiromi leaned forward and crossed her arms in front of her to exaggerate her cleavage. Then she added a pout to the mix. It was Hiromi's killer pose, and it worked once again, as all the camera lenses switched back to focus on her.

She was convinced she was going to win. She was in a different league from the college students who were doing this as a temp job. She had a five-year track record behind her, and she knew how to make herself look her best.

The media people she had been waiting for finally turned up. First up were the guys from *Treasure* magazine. They shunted the nerd brigade off to one side. All the girls who had been handing out brochures sidled up onto the stage. Everyone was hoping to be selected.

The bearded cameraman took his time looking over all the models. The silence dragged on.

"Right then. You, you, and you," he announced, pointing at each of the girls in turn. "Line up there over, would you."

Hiromi was one of the three. She felt slightly relieved—and very, very superior. This photographer seemed to have good taste after all. Directing a half-smile of thanks at him, Hiromi made very sure to secure the place at the center of the three.

Atsuko hadn't been chosen. Tough on her, but life's like that. Atsuko was destined to end up as a run-of-the-mill housewife. She was nice, but she just wasn't glitzy enough.

"Okay girls, smile!"

At the photographer's bidding Hiromi unleashed the white teeth of which she was so proud. Flashes went off. Three years ago Hiromi had gone out with a dentist and he had fixed up her teeth for free. She had left him as soon as the job was done. But she did not feel the slightest bit guilty. He'd had his fun with a young and sexy model. Who knows—maybe he'd gotten the better end of the bargain?

She spontaneously changed her pose to show off her cleavage.

The photographer was getting turned on, and the frenzied clicking of his shutter grew louder.

When the photo session was over, the journalist came up to her. "Are you going to be a good girl and give me your name, age, and vital statistics?" he asked cockily.

Hiromi gave him the information he wanted, subtracting two years from her age, increasing the size of her bust and hips, and reducing her waist measurement.

"Which issue will the pictures be in? Make sure and splash 'em over lots of pages, yeah?" She used her special wheedling voice and pawed at the man's arm.

The journalist looked flustered. *I won't be happy if my pix are squeezed into the butt-end of your magazine*, she was thinking to herself. Just then the photographer started snapping away beside her. She turned around to see what was going on.

He was shooting Emilin solo.

Hiromi simply could not believe it. The girl had *nothing* going for her except that she was young.

Hiromi went over and whispered to Atsuko, "What's so special about her, anyway?"

"What have you got to moan about, Hiromi?" said Atsuko, pouting. "You got your picture taken—unlike some of us."

"That photographer's probably a fricking pedophile."

She was furious. If they were shooting that kid solo, it was pretty obvious what sort of layout they had in mind. *This is beyond a joke*, she thought. *I'm by far the best-looking woman here.*

By the time the crew from the TV show turned up, Hiromi had tugged her front zipper down almost another inch.

The show was approaching its climax. The lights were lowered, and Hiromi danced to the sound of thumping dance music, jiggling her boobs as much as possible.

She shot lascivious looks at the cameraman as she danced. Just as she'd hoped, he got turned on and moved forward, just below the stage. He panned up from a low angle. His camera was like a tongue working its way up the length of her body. When the lens reached her face, she gave a wink. *That's in the bag!*

In all the excitement, Atsuko came over and joined her. The camera drew back to get them both in the shot together.

Doesn't matter, thought Hiromi. *Atsuko's a good friend. I can afford to share the glory.*

Then two, then three more girls gathered round Hiromi. The camera drew further and further back.

Come off it girls, don't push your luck. It's me he wants to film.

One of the girls leaned forward and blew a kiss into the camera lens.

Hiromi noticed the camera had zoomed in. They were filming the bitch in close-up! It was an outrage, another girl getting the best shot like that!

At some point, the whole thing turned into a shoving match, and Hiromi was elbowed out of the center spot. What a sordid bunch these girls were!

Hiromi would not let them get the better of her. She took a deep breath and clenched her fists. Then she pulled her front zipper down another half-inch and waded back into the pack.

Glancing down off the stage, she noticed the middle-aged man from the video game company staring up at her with his mouth agape. Hiromi did not give a fig what men thought of her unless they were young and handsome. The music pounded at eardrum-bursting volume and the girls were bathed in multicolor lights.

It was after eleven when Hiromi got back to her one-room apartment. She took a shower and then sat herself down in front of the television. She wanted to see if today's show would be featured. She set up the video, naturally. She always saved the programs she appeared in—no matter how briefly—on tape.

She watched the TV sitting cross-legged on the floor as she dried her hair. Now and again she would help herself to a potato chip. Today's client had been a tight-fisted bastard. He had ordered in some pizzas for the staff dressing room—and that was it! To make matters worse, there had not been enough to go round.

All the models had enjoyed a good moan about that. Jesus, Shylock, you could at least order the thing from a decent hotel restaurant!

Tomorrow was on. They covered the trade show at the beginning of the program. Hiromi was on TV—for all of three seconds! How could she be happy with that? And just as she had feared, the kiss-blower ended up with more airtime.

That was it, then! Hiromi plopped her legs out in front of her and sighed. A few seconds wasn't that bad, given that it wasn't an interview.

Drinking fruit juice straight from the bottle, she started brushing out her hair. When her hair was long, it was a pain in the ass to take care of, but she could not bring herself to cut it. Making her long hair stream out with a flick of her head was a trick she had perfected for reeling men in. It was a power she did not want to lose.

She stopped brushing her hair and changed the channel to *Beautiful*. *Beautiful* was a late-night variety show featuring young girls by the truckload.

Hiromi's current ambition was to appear on this show. If you became a regular—a "Beauty Girl"—your career was sure to take off.

Hiromi spotted a familiar face in the background. It was a girl she had worked with at the speedway.

She flushed with anger. Why her? How had she managed to get on the show? She wasn't even that good-looking.

The girl was wearing a miniskirt and sitting with her legs crossed. The presenter asked her a smutty question. "Oh gosh," she replied coquettishly, "I really wouldn't know."

Where did that little innocent virgin act come from? Back when they'd been working together, the bitch had been screwing every driver she could lay her hands on. Come to think of it, she'd probably gotten onto this show by sleeping with one of the program's sponsors.

Hiromi's lips quivered with rage. She could not bear to watch and switched off the TV. She threw herself facedown onto her bed and buried her face in her pillow.

"You're twenty-four years old," she whispered to herself.

If she was honest, she had to admit that she didn't have much time left if she wanted to make it as a TV personality.

I so want to be famous, she thought. *I want my name in lights.*

But would that day ever come? A feeling of desperation welled up in her throat.

She could stake it all on a nude photo shoot.

But she wasn't that confident about the quality of her nipples.

That night she didn't manage to get to sleep either.

"So you're taking the medicine I prescribed, but you still can't sleep?"

Today Irabu had slicked his hair back with gel—it looked like he'd got it cut too. And he wasn't grubby like last time; his white coat was nicely starched.

"Well, it wasn't that strong. What we'll do now is try you on a stronger one."

Glancing down, she noticed that Irabu was wearing Ferragamo shoes rather than sandals. Then there was the overpowering smell of aftershave. Hiromi had to work hard to stop herself gagging.

"Right, first off is our old friend the injection."

Hiromi was given another injection. Mayumi, the nurse, had three buttons undone at the chest. Was she trying to compete with her? Hiromi was tempted to undo her own buttons right back.

She sat in the chair facing the doctor.

"Hiromi, love," said Irabu, grinning as he looked her up and down. "You look like a real star."

"Oh, I don't know about that." She agreed with him one hundred percent, but went through her part in the pantomime anyway.

"And have you tried going out without wearing makeup?"

"No, I haven't. Not yet, anyway."

Today, once again, she had been unable to leave the house without her makeup on. And her skirt was a mini.

This afternoon she had a meeting at a big ad agency about her next job. All the other models were sure to be dressed to the nines. She couldn't very well be the only one to turn up in casual clothes and without makeup.

"And someone—we don't know who—is still stalking you?"

"Afraid so. From the second I leave my house in the morning."

This morning she had not just spat in the gutter; she had also kicked the cardboard boxes piled up in the garbage area.

The old lady in the cigarette shop over the road had given her a hard stare. So frigging what, she thought. I don't know you from Adam.

"Hiromi, love, you're a beautiful woman. I can understand why someone would want to stalk you."

You old creep! I bet you can, she wanted to retort.

"As the butterflies gather round beautiful flowers, so . . ."

She knew what he meant. But the problem was that moths gathered too.

"On reflection, I do think that the best thing is for you to get protection." Irabu was leaning toward her. "That's why—for a while, at least—I've decided to act as your personal bodyguard."

"Huh?" Hiromi could not believe what she was hearing.

"In other words, Hiromi, love, I'll be there at your side."

Was this joker a real doctor, for God's sake? Hiromi was at a loss for words.

"I'll chauffeur you around in my Porsche. Tee-hee-hee."

That creepy laugh again.

"No," Hiromi replied, finally pulling herself together. "That won't be necessary."

"No need to be shy."

"I am not being shy," she snapped back angrily.

"What a pity."

Irabu started pouting like a sulky child. Somebody needs to give him a good talking-to, she thought, and she looked over toward the nurse: Mayumi was sprawled on the couch in the corner, leafing through a magazine.

Hiromi's head started to ache. Compared to these two, she was a picture of normality.

"By the way, this person stalking you," asked Irabu, "is it just one man?"

Hiromi was caught off guard by the question. She had never even thought about it.

"Think about it: he appears everywhere you go, regardless of the time of the day or night. That would be physically difficult for a single man, so maybe—just maybe—there are several of them."

Hiromi thought it a plausible idea. When a woman was as good-looking as she was, there was nothing so extraordinary in several men obsessing about her at the same time. In a way, really, it would be stranger if there were only one of them.

"I think you may be right." Anxiety overwhelmed her. "Doctor, what do you think I should do?"

"Well, as I told you last time, you can try changing your image. How about getting your hair cut? I must say," Irabu said, wriggling about in his chair, "I've always had a bit of a thing for girls with short hair myself. Tee-hee-hee."

Hiromi sighed deeply.

"It'd suit you to a tee, Hiromi love."

She did not want to cut her hair, and she did not want to change her clothes or the way she made herself up either. For Hiromi, it would be the equivalent of a samurai throwing away his sword.

"All right. If that's something you don't want to do, how about moving to a place that's out of the stalkers' reach."

"—What are you saying? That I should move somewhere far away?"

"Uh-uh. I'm suggesting moving somewhere more expensive. You see, the stalkers who are after you now are probably thinking, 'This woman could be mine one day.' I mean, the thing about you, Hiromi, is that, yes, you do dress flashily—but there's something very common about you too."

She did not like that at all. Her? Common? Who did he think he was? Her nickname at college had been "ice queen."

"That's the thing that's giving these stalkers their unrealistic hopes. So you've got to move yourself up a notch, make yourself more of an unattainable object. Then they'll think, 'This one's out of my league,' and throw in the towel."

Irabu rambled on. "Traditionally it's the swimsuit models from men's magazines who have the biggest problem with stalkers. They're popular because they pretend to be 'everybody's girl next door.' Supermodels are the opposite side of the coin: men just gaze from afar, but never dare to imagine they could get one for themselves."

As an argument, it certainly made sense. That was it, then. She had been too accessible. She had to make the creeps understand that she was completely out of their league. She had to raise the bar.

All right then, she thought. I'll make myself even more gorgeous than I am now—even more irresistible.

What Irabu was saying was far from stupid. Was it her imagination, or had she started getting used to his uncouth looks?

"By the way, would you like to go out to lunch? I was thinking of sushi in Ginza."

Yuck! She turned him down with a cold stare and got ready to go.

"Well, please take these as a gift from me."

He whipped out a bunch of flowers from behind the white screen. The most fabulous roses. They must have cost tens of thousands of yen. He was a doctor all right! He had money—and lots of it!

Hiromi had a sudden inspiration.

"Ooh, how lovely," she gushed, exaggerating her surprise.

"But you know, Doctor," she went on half-jokingly, half-flirtatiously, "I'm more of a latest-Prada-handbag kind of girl than a red-roses girl."

Irabu's cheeks flushed. "Uh, Prada, you say? Fine."

"You'll get me one?" Hiromi tried to control her glee. It was just so easy!

"I'll get you one by tomorrow. Tee-hee-hee."

I did it! Hiromi thought, gloating. *I may need to come in to the hospital every day, but I'll make damn sure I get some nice accessories out of it!*

She thought about giving Irabu a kiss on the cheek. But she jettisoned the idea when she noticed the sheen of grease on his skin.

That evening after the meeting Hiromi went out with Atsuko for a cup of tea. She told her that it looked as if there were several stalkers on her tail.

"Are you sure you're okay?" said Atsuko with a worried frown. "I thought you'd gone to talk things over with a neurologist."

"I did. He said that since it was physically impossible for one man to follow me like this, the likelihood was that there were several. I just thought to myself, 'Of course, that's got to be it.'"

"He sounds funny to me, that doctor of yours. Maybe you should find another one. The thing is, Hiromi, why are you so ready to believe something like that? Don't you think you might just be imagining it all?"

"There you go again," said Hiromi sulkily. "Making it sound like there's something wrong with me."

"You've been acting strange lately. I mean, today, there you were, spitting in the corridor."

"Oh shit! You were watching?"

"Yeah. And I saw you doing some weird waddling walk and scratching your butt."

"That's to put the stalkers off. To destroy their fantasy image of me."

"And what was all that business of calling the dressing room assistant 'shithead'?"

"What do you expect me to do? He was ogling me—and he's not even a full-timer. A temp's got to understand what the rules are.

"I can't believe all this," said Atsuko, her eyes bulging in her head.

"I've got no choice in the matter. I mean, I'm the victim."

"Hiromi, can I say something to you as a friend? I think you're much too self-conscious."

"Too self-conscious? What do you mean?"

"The fact of the matter is that other people are just not as interested in you as you think they are."

"That's a nice thing to say! You're jealous, Atsuko, because I get all the attention."

"What am I supposed to be jealous of?"

They argued back and forth for a while. Things must have gotten heated, since the waitress eventually came over and asked them to keep their voices down. Hiromi got even more furious at being yelled at by such an ugly old woman. She paid for her tea and walked out of the café. Again she felt someone watching her.

"Cocksucker! I am so far out of your league!" She verbalized her thoughts.

A man who was walking toward her stopped in his tracks as if he had hit a brick wall. His jaw dropped, and he stared dumbfounded at Hiromi. Then he shook his head in disbelief and moved on.

It's all of them! They're everywhere!

Hiromi felt a surge of anger.

Even Atsuko didn't believe her! Irabu was so much more understanding.

She kicked at a telephone pole, and the heel of her shoe snapped neatly off.

THREE

Hiromi's job for today was to be a bogus customer for a marriage bureau. She set out for the Ginza hotel, wearing a pink two-piece and clutching the Prada bag Irabu had just given her.

The marriage bureau in question was a well-known firm that advertised in all the magazines. But the male customers would complain if all the women it was arranged for them to meet were ugly, so sometimes the management would hire models as stand-ins. It was a fraud of a kind that most of the marriage bureaus practiced. If the man ended up taking a shine to you, the firm would, of course, cook up some plausible story to stop things from going any further.

Two hours plus lunch, and it paid twenty thousand yen. Trade shows were glitzy, but the money was crap, so for Hiromi this was an important source of income.

She had a prep meeting with the woman from the bureau in the hotel lobby.

"Really, Miss Yasukawa! That outfit! You're frightfully overdressed."

"Oh, am I?" she replied, all doe-eyed innocence. But the woman was far from happy.

"Today, in case you happen to have forgotten, you're meant to be a girl who works in the accounts department of a large-scale electrical contractor."

Hiromi did not bother to reply. Did the woman seriously expect her to walk into the lobby of a top-class hotel dressed like a frump?

"Well, nothing we can do about it now. I made you a new name card, so make damn sure you don't go and give him the wrong one. Your name is Hiromi Suzuki. You're twenty-four years old. You were born in Tokyo, and you live with your parents. You did home economics at college, and then you started working at your present firm. Your hobbies are watching movies and baking cakes."

Last time it had been reading and needlework. Hiromi always found it difficult not to laugh.

"Now, as for the other party—" The woman was flicking through her forms. "Ah, yes. A Mr. Minoru Ota. Born in Tokyo. Thirty years of age. Five foot seven inches tall. Weighs 155 pounds. Graduated from Tama Trade School. Now works for an engineering firm . . ."

The woman's explanation droned on. The man's yearly salary was four-and-a-half million yen. How the hell was he planning to support a wife on that sort of money? Hiromi would rather die than go under the ten million mark.

"Good. That's that, then. Be sure not to blow your cover," the woman warned her.

"Yes, ma'am, certainly," Hiromi replied in her best office-worker style.

The woman led the way into the hotel restaurant. The two-hour endurance test was about to begin. All Hiromi needed to do was smile prettily and keep the conversation from dying.

The man was sitting at a table by the window, and was dressed in a navy blue suit and tie. His face was cheerfully porcine. When he saw Hiromi, his narrow eyes opened wide.

Surprised to see someone this good-looking? gloated Hiromi.

The woman made the necessary introductions. When the guy got to his feet he was a dwarf compared to Hiromi in her heels. What was all that about him being five foot seven! And he was a fat little bugger—must weigh 175 pounds, easy.

"Now why don't you call each other by your first names? That will help get the ball rolling."

The bureau woman left them after completing the introduction. The waiter brought some hors d'oeuvres over to their table.

"So, Hiromi, do you eat a lot of French food? To tell you the truth, it's a bit stiff and formal for me. Can't say I like it all that well." This was the man's opening gambit.

"Oh, I know what you mean," Hiromi replied, eyes modestly downcast.

"Let's go to a beer garden next time, then." He grinned happily.

You jerk! Do you seriously think there's going to be a next time? You're just going to keep on being bilked. Two hundred and fifty thousand yen for your join-up fee and thirty thousand a time for a face-to-face! Loser!

"But it's terrible, Hiromi. To think that a gorgeous girl like you has to use an agency to find a partner."

Not terrible, genius. More like suspicious.

"At my work everyone's already married," she simpered.

"You've put your finger on it. The biggest problem we face is not getting to meet people. The women at my firm are all middle-aged part-timers."

That's the least of your problems, fatso. For a start, you should think seriously about losing some weight.

Excoriating him mentally was the only way Hiromi could forget about the time. She never managed to enjoy the food on this job. The cooking itself was top-class, but the work sabotaged the flavor somehow.

A young couple sat down at the table beside them. Hiromi glanced over nonchalantly. The man was tall and handsome, and the girl just so-so. The girl looked over at them.

Hiromi was ashamed to be there with such a dullard. But her date was oblivious, chomping his food noisily.

"So, Hiromi, how many of these dates have you been on so far?"

Did he really need to speak so loudly?

She wondered what she should say. "Actually, today's my first time."

"It's the fourth for me. They never found me anyone good, so I went in to complain. That's when they arranged for me to meet you."

Hiromi realized that their neighbors were listening in. She scowled down at the floor.

"You're fabulous, Hiromi—and I'm not just saying that to be nice."

Hiromi was furious. The pig, memorizing his stupid little romantic speeches!

The next-door couple winked at each other and sniggered. Hiromi's face burned with shame and rage.

There was no justice in the world. Why should her looks be frittered away on stupid jobs like this? Under normal circumstances, she wouldn't give a soul in this place so much as the time of day.

"And the way you dress: not bad at all."

"I can't fucking take much more of this shit!"

Hiromi gasped in horror and went pale. Had she really said that?

The man's fork-hand froze halfway to his mouth. He and the people at the next table had turned to stone.

"Oh, um, what I meant was, this food, it's all a bit hot and spicy for me. The words just popped out of my mouth." Sweat beading her forehead, she laughed weakly.

The man looked put out, but he joined in and laughed along with her. A close call, but she'd survived.

After lunch, they went out into the garden. Hiromi didn't want him making any complaints, so she was on her best behavior.

"How many children do you want to have, Hiromi?" asked the man as they inspected the carp in the pond in the Japanese garden.

"Two, I think," she replied, feigning shyness.

"Wow, same as me! Seems we're kindred spirits."

Puh-lease. Do you want me to chuck you off this dinky little footbridge?

"And if you got married, what'd you do about your job?"

"I'm easy."

"Well, I'd like my wife to stop working. I want my family properly taken care of."

How the hell could he make a speech like that on four-and-a-half million a year? But Hiromi no longer had enough energy left to get angry. Men like this would never learn.

Her two hours of torture over, Hiromi left the hotel. "What did I do to deserve this?" she whispered to herself as she walked along the Ginza.

It was while she was waiting for the street light to change that she became aware of someone behind her watching her. He was a new kind of stalker. She knew that just from the weird vibe. She guessed it must be the man she'd just had the date with.

She turned around and looked. She couldn't see anyone, but she was sure. She'd acquired a new stalker. She felt like she wanted to scream.

If this was what he'd been up to, she should have told him off when she'd had the chance.

Hiromi swung her handbag over her shoulder and strode across the road.

"There are even more of 'em now, eh? Well, Hiromi, love, when a girl's as attractive as you are, it's inevitable," pronounced Irabu, frowning with effort as he struggled to cross his stubby little legs.

Hiromi was relieved that someone understood. She had telephoned Atsuko, who had coldly informed her that she couldn't be her friend anymore. Yes, the only person who really listened to what she said was the doctor sitting there in front of her now. Hiromi had revised her opinion of Irabu. He had been number one on her "men I'd rather die than sleep with" list, but now he had slipped down to the number-two position.

"The act of stalking is based on what we call a 'delusion of reference.' It originates in the desire to escape reality. People with this delusion are unable to accept the circumstances they are placed in, and decide that other people or the system are responsible for those circumstances. In this way, they are able to justify their behavior and free themselves from any sense of guilt."

How right he was! She'd like to tell the stalkers to their faces exactly what was wrong with them.

"In a way, they are like people who are carrying around a mirror that reflects their image and only their image. They are convinced that the self-image that appears in their mirror is good-looking and attractive to the opposite sex—and they are absolutely certain that other people feel the same way about them too."

Hiromi felt a warm glow of satisfaction inside: what Irabu was saying was so true.

"The result is that these people never have any self-doubt. It's what's called excessive self-consciousness."

Heh? Hadn't someone else mentioned that to her recently? Well, so what? The important thing was that she was the victim.

"But Doctor, what should I do? I feel less afraid now, maybe because I'm getting used to it. But I am so depressed all the time," Hiromi moaned. Her feelings of anger were growing stronger by the day.

"Since you don't want to change your image or go somewhere beyond their reach. . ." Irabu stroked his chin thoughtfully. "There's always the option of transferring the stalker's obsession onto someone else."

"Someone else?"

"Let's say that a male actor is in a film acting opposite a woman sex symbol, and let's say they're in a sex scene together. It's the man who'll get threatening mail from the woman's die-hard fans. They'll send razor blades and things to him—not to the woman herself. They just can't forgive him for kissing the person they idolize. Fancy trying something like that, Hiromi dear?"

"Basically you're saying I should go out on a date and make sure the stalkers see me."

"Exactamento. You go out to Odaiba, or some such date spot, one evening. Have a bit of kiss, a bit of a cuddle, with a guy. You make very sure that the stalkers see you doing it. And if you're lucky, they'll become insanely jealous and start following the man instead."

Hiromi was enthralled, leaning forward and grunting her agreement.

It sounded worth trying. Hiromi knew that they all idolized her. They were no longer rational. Irabu had slipped to the number-three slot in her list.

Hiromi had no moral objection to the proposed strategy. Her needs, after all, were paramount.

Who should she pick for this important role? There was Yoshi—now in his eighth year at university—whose family owned a pachinko parlor. Or what about Su, her estate agent "friend" with a wife and kids? And Yashi, the writer and Metropolitan Assemblyman, was another possibility. In fact, there were any number of men who'd come running at a single phone call. It was good that she'd gotten to know a lot of men! Having the right skill set was key to getting places in life.

She was deep in thought when she heard Irabu say, "Hiromi, love, let me do this to help you out."

"You what?"

"My house has excellent security, so we'd be in no danger. And anyway, if it's for my Hiromi's sake, what's a little danger?" he tittered.

"Oh no, Doctor, that won't be necessary." She shook her head vigorously. What nerve!

"There's no need to act shy, Hiromi dear," Irabu said in an oily voice as he held out his hand.

Jesus! Now he was holding her hand.

"Doctor, please! What do you think you're doing?" Hiromi looked over to the nurse for help. The nurse didn't even bother to look up.

"I don't know quite how to say this, Hiromi, but I think I've fallen for you." He had risen to his feet, and was hovering over her, his nostrils flaring.

The twisted old quack! Did he think this was funny?

"Stop it!" She took a step backward. She didn't like the idea of waving her hands hysterically and squealing, "Oh please, stop it, please," so instead she used her leg to block him, before drawing it back to take a good hard kick.

Irabu lost his footing. He crashed down onto the armchair, and it toppled over backward with him in it.

There was a loud thump. Apparently Irabu had hit his head on the floor.

Irabu groaned. Hiromi peeped over the chair and saw him crying like a baby.

"You were the one who started it," she said.

"I'm sorry. I won't do it again," Irabu said with a pout. "I have this philosophy of always acting on my impulses."

What the hell kind of philosophy was that?

"But I did get a glimpse of your panties." A smile broke through his tears.

I can't understand this guy, thought Hiromi. She had never met a man like him before. What sort of upbringing had he had? Hiromi sat back down on her stool and heaved a deep sigh.

Irabu got to his feet and rubbed the back of his head. "I'm getting a bump," he said, grinning.

Hiromi noticed for the first time that Irabu had left his white coat unbuttoned. The suit he had on underneath was very stylish. Noticing her gaze, he declared proudly that it was a Hermes, and showed her the label like a child showing off a toy.

When she came to think of it, Hiromi vaguely remembered that the last time she'd been here Irabu had been wearing a Burberry check sweater; and the time before that there'd been his Ferragamo shoes.

Irabu was dressing more fancily all the time. Back on her first visit, he'd been all tousled hair and sandals. She scrutinized his face. His eyebrows had been trimmed and shaped. And the shiny layer of grease had gone from his skin.

"I've started going to this men's salon," Irabu said, placing a hand on his cheek. "After all, you never know when you might fall in love with a female patient. Hee-hee-hee."

A wave of exhaustion swept over Hiromi.

I don't understand. I don't understand this guy at all, she thought.

But the name Hermes had come up, and it was an opportunity she could not ignore.

"Doctor, you look great. I'm a silly girl, I know, but I'd really love to have a Hermes suit for myself too." Instinctively she became all kittenish.

"Huh? Oh sure, fine, no problem." Irabu was under her spell. "I'll call in a personal shopper from a department store for the next time you come to the hospital."

It was almost too easy. There was no challenge involved.

So what? She'd get something out of it. That was the important thing.

She selected Uchi, who was a freelance photographer, as her sacrificial victim. He was a sordid character with sex on the brain. If—and that was only an "if"—something did go wrong, she needn't suffer any pangs of conscience.

Hiromi began picturing different scenarios to herself: Uchi becoming the stalkers' new target; Uchi getting stabbed in the back; the whole stalker gang being arrested.

"I just think maybe we should get together from time to time." Hiromi used her wheedling voice on the phone, and, sure enough, Uchi came trotting along after her, wagging his tail.

"That's so great. I can't believe that *you're* asking *me* out."

Cretin! Fool! Twit!

In her present circumstances, Hiromi was prepared to look at men as tools to be exploited for her own ends. She found it hard to believe that she'd been a virgin once. Maybe she'd ended up being a little too aware of the market value of her body. Still, if sightseers wanted to stroll in your garden, you'd be a fool not to charge them for the privilege.

No sooner had Uchi swung the Volvo out onto the Metropolitan Expressway than Hiromi felt that someone was after them. They'd even had a car ready! The stalkers were her enemies, yes, but she had to admire them.

Hiromi turned around and sneaked a look at the cars behind.

"Did something happen back there?" asked Uchi.

"Uh-uh, no," she said, her face all sweet innocence.

The Rainbow Bridge came into view. Behind it stood the big Ferris wheel with its lights twinkling against the night sky.

"There's probably a queue for the Ferris wheel at this time of day," said Uchi.

"We could go to the Odaiba Seaside Park. The view's lovely."

"How about Panorama Square? There are no streetlights, so it's full of couples getting down to it."

"Oh no!" she said teasingly. If the place was too dark, the stalkers wouldn't be able to see Uchi's face properly. Hiromi's plan of action was dinner, followed by a kiss-under-the-streetlight scene, then on to a love hotel.

But she wouldn't let Uchi touch her. She had prepared an exit strategy: the sudden arrival of her period.

They drove onto the Rainbow Bridge. The curving expressway straightened out, and Hiromi had a clear line of sight in front and behind. She turned around to check on her pursuers, and her whole body shuddered convulsively.

It was no longer just one or two cars: every single pair of headlights was a car on her tail. She couldn't believe it. It was just too much to take in. Her lips quivered so she covered her mouth with her hand. But the hand too was trembling.

"What's wrong with you, Hiromi?"

"Nothing," she replied, shaking her head. But the blood had drained from her cheeks.

A big truck in the next lane began to overtake them. It drew level, and the driver looked down at Hiromi. There was a sinister half-smile on his face.

"You've gone all pale," Uchi said. "Are you feeling carsick?"

"Uh-uh." Hiromi could only grunt a denial.

Was this really happening? She couldn't even imagine the scope of the problem.

"What is it? If you're feeling bad, I can pull off onto the shoulder."

So that was how it was now, was it? She had ended up becoming a fantasy figure for the entire male population. How was she supposed to live from this point?

"Hey, are you okay? Say something!"

She could hear Uchi's voice above the noise of the expressway. It was something like the mooing of a cow, and yet it almost burst Hiromi's eardrums.

FOUR

Hiromi could not bear to leave the house any more. She spent all day, every day, wrapped up in her futon.

She bought her meals at the convenience store, paid for them, and left. But she almost went crazy thinking that the shop assistant was following her. It was the same with the man at the dry cleaner's and the pizza delivery boy: the moment they clapped eyes on Hiromi, her beauty enthralled them, turning them into stalkers on the spot.

She canceled several jobs she had been given. She just didn't feel up to turning on her auto-smile function. She knew that if she found herself surrounded by a pack of nerds she would probably wind up screaming at them.

She rang Atsuko many times to ask for her help, but Atsuko did not simply refuse to talk to her—she was actively afraid of her.

"Listen, Hiromi, what about making a change in your life?" she had timidly suggested when she dropped by one day. "You could give up this sort of work and get a normal job in a normal company."

Hiromi simply could not believe her ears. Did graduates of Tokyo University work on building sites? Did Olympic gold medalists deliver newspapers? Why should a woman with her looks have to do photocopying or brew up green tea?

"You're only saying that, Atsuko, because you want to get rid of me as a competitor." Quite properly, Hiromi said what she was thinking.

"I can't believe it," gasped Atsuko, shocked. "Is that what you really think?"

"Yes, and I'll let you in on a little secret, Atsuko. I don't regard you as a competitor. My goals are at a different level."

Atsuko scowled and walked out of the apartment without a word. Hiromi had not seen her since. They hadn't spoken by phone either.

Yes, Irabu was the only person who truly understood her. He knew how traumatic this was and had said there was no point in her forcing herself to go out if she didn't want to.

She didn't want to sleep with him—that hadn't changed—but she could probably stand to have dinner with him.

"If you're not feeling your best, the best thing is not to force it. When I'm feeling under the weather, I just shut up shop here right away. Ha-ha-ha." Irabu burst into unrestrained laughter.

Maybe, thought Hiromi, in her next life she should be reborn as an idiot. It certainly meant you had a great deal less to worry about.

"More importantly, Hiromi, I was thinking about getting plastic surgery. Get myself nice double eyelids, like a Westerner. What do you think?"

"What!" exclaimed an incredulous Hiromi.

"I checked in the mirror. If I make my eyelids go double, I look better."

Hiromi felt very strange and lightheaded. She couldn't find the words to reply.

"You had any plastic surgery, Hiromi love?"

"No, I have not," she replied curtly. She had, in fact, had a nose job.

"And I was thinking of getting my chin built out a bit . . ."

At some point, Irabu had picked up a hand mirror. He was now engrossed in inspecting his face from different angles. Hiromi noticed that he had dyed the tips of his hair. And today's outfit was Italian.

The man had finally grasped the importance of looking good, but at his age, it was a little late.

"Perhaps, Doctor, it would be better to get some of the flab removed from that area?" The words just popped out of her mouth.

"Oh, how's that done?" Irabu was leaning forward in his chair. "I'm not a plastic surgeon, you see, so I really don't know much about it."

"There's a sort of vacuum cleaner thingy that sucks out the fat . . ."

Hiromi duly provided him with an explanation. Irabu nodded and grunted.

She felt a little sorry for herself. She was supposed to be the patient. Why on earth did she have to explain things to him?

She was getting more and more depressed. She must have been sighing about a hundred times a day.

When she finally put in an appearance in at the agency, her boss greeted her with sarcasm.

"We've got all the staff we need right now, thank you very much," she said, before opening up the big ledger on her desk and tapping away at her calculator.

You snotty old bag! You can't get me any decent jobs anyway! Hiromi managed to stop herself from saying what she was thinking.

"Is there anything you're not satisfied with here?"

"No . . ." said Hiromi, avoiding her eye.

Hiromi knew that she'd made a mistake in choosing this agency. She regretted it. If she'd worked with a better agency, she'd be a popular media personality by now.

She checked the schedule on the whiteboard. There were hardly any jobs marked in for her. No surprise there, really. After all, she'd had three no-shows.

She looked over at the bulletin board. It was covered in flyers for auditions. A logo caught her eye: "A Star is Born: First-Ever Competition," it said. She craned forward to see who was organizing the thing. It turned out to be the country's biggest film production company.

Hiromi got terribly excited. A film company like that would be sure to give her a chance to break into movies. The prize money was ten million yen. It was a pretty serious competition, then. The winner of the first prize would be heavily promoted as the company's latest discovery. This was the "first-ever" competition, so the film company was really pulling out all the stops.

Hiromi started reading the small print. There were a number of different categories, including "Starlet" and "Actress." It was the Actress category that Hiromi was interested in. Yes, she wanted to be a serious actress.

"Miss," she found herself saying, "I would like to enter this contest."

"That one? But I thought, Miss Yasukawa, you wanted to appear on variety shows on TV?"

"Actually, I always wanted to be an actress." Why the third degree? An entertainer is an entertainer is an entertainer.

"We were planning to put Emilin in for that one." The boss looked thoughtful. "The way we promote our girls at this agency is to say to the world, 'This girl is our top recommendation.' And that's why, as a rule, we like to limit our entry to just one person . . ."

What? That little teeny bopper was your top recommendation? Hiromi felt her cheeks twitching with rage, but kept her feelings under control, bowed her head and whispered, "Please, I'm begging you."

"Oh, all right then. I suppose there's no harm in putting in the paperwork for the first round of auditions. I'll put in an application for you." She adjusted her glasses, looked up at Hiromi, and continued, "In return, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't suddenly drop out of any modeling jobs we've set up, okay?" Then she went back to her work.

Patronizing old witch! When I win, maybe I'll let you carry my bags around—if you're lucky, that is.

"Oh, Miss Yasukawa . . ." The boss looked up at her. "What should I give as your age?"

"Could you, uh, make it twenty?"

The boss said nothing for a moment, muttered, "All right, I suppose," and started to shuffle the documents on her desk.

"Thank you so much. Goodbye," Hiromi said, just before she left. Once outside, she picked a large booger out of her nose and squashed it onto the agency's nameplate.

What was wrong with that bitch of a boss? She was just a failed TV personality herself, so why did she act so superior? Hiromi knew that the high point of her career had been acting as body double in the shower scene in a two-hour soap opera.

As Hiromi proceeded along the street, it was not long before the stalkers started to follow her. She could feel their presence all the time. There was a whole regiment of them: a hundred people or more.

But they could follow her, if they really had to. This, after all, was their last chance. Soon she'd be a film star. Soon she would rise to heights where they could not follow.

She saw her reflection in the window of a boutique and struck a pose.

What a fabulous waist she had! And look at her firm shapely bottom! Look at those perky, proud breasts!

I am perfection.

She grinned at the thought. She smiled a blinding white smile.

She was sure of it: she would be chosen. She was the finest living woman on the planet.

She was swept away by her own feelings.

A middle-aged man walked by and stared at her.

"Feast your eyes, mister," she said to him menacingly. "This is your last-ever chance to see me up close and in the flesh!"

The man gave a start and scuttled across to the far edge of the pavement. He looked so comical that Hiromi had to laugh out loud. At last, she could become the person she always had been inside. She could become the heroine of the piece, the center of attention.

For a while, she was doubled up with laughter. Everyone in the street looked askance at her, but she didn't take it badly. It was only to be expected, when you were as good-looking as she was.

When she mentioned the audition to Irabu, he announced his intention to come along to lend emotional support. "I'll bring my pom-poms and cheer you on." His eyes were gleaming.

She decided it was best not to tell him where the competition was going to be held. After all, she wouldn't be coming to this hospital for much longer now.

Hiromi sailed through the first round of auditions on paper.

She wasn't at all surprised to hear that she was one of only two hundred people chosen from a pool of a hundred thousand applicants.

She imagined that they'd just stripped out all the amateurs. The two hundred survivors probably all belonged to talent agencies. Nobody was going to able to say, "A friend of mine entered me without telling me, and I ended up being selected." The thing the jury looked for—the only thing they ever looked for—was motivation.

Now the competition was really getting started. Hiromi went to a beauty salon to perfect her loveliness. Her complexion—which had been getting steadily worse—regained its old glow. The skin is a good indicator of general health, thought Hiromi, so I must be fine now.

The second stage of the competition was held in a specially rented theater.

There was an interview, a swimsuit parade, and a special performance. In each section, only ten people could go forward to the final stage.

Naturally, Hiromi was brimming with confidence. When she heard that the sponsors were looking for an actress with "orthodox good looks," she wanted to jump with joy. It was almost unfairly advantageous to her! As she examined herself daily in the mirror, she started believing that, yes, she was the best-looking woman in the world.

She would make her debut in Japan, and then, after three years or so, move on to Hollywood. This wasn't a dream. It was a plan. Over the last few days, Hiromi done an emotional U-turn and was on a permanent high.

The green room was just a big, rambling space with rows of tables and chairs. The contestants grabbed a space for themselves and focused on making themselves up.

She recognized a number of people. They were the women who manically rushed around from one audition to another—audition junkies. They scowled at each other, but they never said hello.

"Hiromi, glad to see you got through the first round too."

Hiromi turned around. It was Emilin, the young girl from the agency.

"It's such a relief to know somebody here—"

Lying bitch! I can smell your fear.

"—but I'd no idea you were only twenty years old." She gave an ironic smile.

Think you can psych me out that way? Ridiculous, Hiromi thought. She had experience on her side. Why, in the past she had sneak-fed laxatives to her rivals—and been sneak-fed them in return.

"My advice to you would be to watch out in the swimsuit category. They ask you to do some moves, so you'd better make sure your bra doesn't slip down and show the industrial tape you prop up your boobs with. That would disgrace the whole agency."

Hiromi had made a point of speaking in a voice that carried across the whole green room. The color drained from Emilin's face.

"And you'd better not say anything about your school record either. You don't want to give away how low your test scores were."

Emilin's lower lip was quivering as she went back to her seat. You could hear people in the room whispering, "Ooh, nasty!" to one another.

So the hell what? This is war. Who needs friends?

Hiromi left the green room to go to the toilet. As she was walking down the stairs, a voice behind her said, "Hi, Hiromi, love." It sounded familiar. But no, it couldn't be—*surely*?

"Hee-hee-hee. I decided to give the audition a go myself." It was Irabu. Dressed all in leather, he looked like some sort of monstrous balloon.

"Like you, I rather fancy appearing in a movie. I applied for the male actor category."

"Doctor—oh, really—did you?" She found it difficult to muster a reply.

"Yup. If I win, I'll be a doctor with a sideline in acting. Pretty cool, huh?"

"Remind me, was there a character actor section? Or a section specially for murder-victim and fall-guy actors?"

"No, no, no. I'm going for Action Hero. I was thinking about Young Heartthrob, but, you know . . ."

Hiromi's head had started to ache. Didn't he realize this was a real audition for a major film studio?

"So, Doctor, you made it through the paperwork stage, then?"

"I never bother with stuff like that. My dad is a governor of the Japan Medical Association and has all kinds of connections among his old college friends, so he can pull a lot of strings," confided Irabu, swelling with pride. "If we both get through, then we can act together—do love scenes! Hee-hee-hee."

Irabu was looking at his reflection in a big mirror on the landing. He struck a pose.

Now Hiromi understood: the man was a narcissist. Even with *that* face and *that* body, he was still convinced that he was a looker.

He must be happy in his fantasy world!

"Check this out." Irabu crossed his arms and stroked his chin with his hand. "Just like De Niro, right?"

Forget about this guy for now, Hiromi thought. This whole conversation was a joke. She needed to concentrate on her audition. "See you later, Doctor," she said, and dashed off.

Sitting inside the bathroom stall, she gave herself a last-minute pep talk. "I am beautiful," she told herself. "I am the best." She took a deep breath and said to herself, "Get out there and knock 'em dead, girl."

The audition began.

Hiromi did her interview in a mini-dress. There was no question of not showing off her pride-and-joy legs. She sat with them tucked slightly off to one side and rested her hands on her knees.

"So, Miss Yasukawa, tell us what you look for in a man," they asked her. Hiromi pretended to ponder the question.

"I like a man who has a dream; and who can do what it takes to make that dream come true."

The secret was to pause ever so slightly before replying to their trite questions. This gave the impression that you had come up with the answer on the spot.

"A man is about to commit suicide. How would you talk him out of it?"

"Hmm. Let me see—" Looking puzzled was okay, but you had to make sure you looked *charmingly* puzzled. "—I'd say to him, 'Tomorrow I'll introduce you to my sexy sister, so why not put off your suicide just for one day?'"

The panel of judges exploded into laughter. A nice warm feeling ran up Hiromi's back: her interview had been a big success.

Hiromi's turn over, she scoped out the interview performances of her rivals. And if she could catch their eye, she could always put them off.

Emilin was idiotic. They asked her to name an inspirational figure from the cinema, and she said that Angelina Jolie's figure was probably the most inspirational she'd ever seen. The judges hooted with laughter.

Her eyes met Emilin's for an instant, and Hiromi gave a mocking snort.

Hiromi was unchallenged in the swimsuit parade. With her figure and her experience as an auto racing model, none of the judges could tear their eyes off her.

But she knew it was important to exaggerate her innocent charm. Walking was one of Hiromi's fortes, but she made a point of moving with a hint of awkwardness. She nonetheless managed to show off her cleavage properly in her final bow.

Emilin made a fool of herself in this section too. "Good," said the judges. "Take a turn, please." Emilin looked confused—then actually got down on the floor and did a somersault.

The whole auditorium exploded in laughter. Emilin looked haggard.

When they passed each other in the corridor, Hiromi hissed at her, "You're embarrassing the whole agency." Emilin flushed scarlet and bit her lip.

Hiromi knew that she had as good as won already. It was just a question of wrapping things up with the final performance event.

Hiromi was going to do a disco dance. Having already worn a mini-dress for the interview, the plan was to go for the boyish look in this section. She'd opted for the army look complete with beret.

She got changed in the green room and stood in front of the mirror to put the beret on her head.

There was a strange rustling sound. *What was that?* she wondered, and tried to take the beret back off. The blood drained from her face, and she went pale.

Someone's done me.

Everything went black. The blood retreated from her head down to her feet; then it turned right around and pulsed back up to her head.

Someone had put industrial tape into her beret. Sticky side out.

"Oh, no, no, no!" she shrieked. "Who was it? Who did this to me?"

But she knew who it was. It was Emilin.

The girls clustered around her. Their faces were grim as they looked at her hair. Emilin was not part of the group.

Hiromi managed to get the beret off, but there was still industrial tape stuck in her hair. It was on the top and on the sides of her head too. The beret must have been full of the stuff.

Hiromi was in a daze. Her whole body was trembling with a mixture of shock and rage.

"Hey, Emilin!" she roared. "Where the fuck are you? Come out here."

The girls drew back. It was clear that they didn't want to get involved.

"Don't think you're going to get away with something like this!" Hiromi was charging around the green room. She didn't know what to do with herself. A feeling of desperation rose in her throat choking her. She started to panic.

It was all over. The audition was wrecked. She was already twenty-four. This had been her last chance. She could never become an actress now. She would never amount to anything more than a trade-show model. She would never be anything more than a fantasy figure for creepy men.

She was in despair. She was wandering aimlessly through the auditorium when she heard a man's irate voice. "What do you mean, you won't let me audition? I've told you a million times that I'm serious about this."

It was Irabu. He had cornered a member of the film company staff in a corner of the hall and was haranguing him. The official wasn't buying it.

"Are you out of your mind? I have no idea who arranged this for you, but it's clearly not possible for a man of your age to become an action star."

"What, are you blind? Can't you see that this is star material, right here before your eyes?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave. We've got work to do here."

"Ah, Hiromi, love." Irabu had noticed her. "Have a word with this fellow, will you? Tell him I'm serious."

"Uh, excuse me, my name is Hiromi Yasukawa. I just want to confirm that I've got the most points in the rankings right now." She grabbed the man's arm and started to tug on it violently.

"Who the hell are you?" said the man, pulling back. "Hey, somebody call security!" He was shouting into the radio he was holding.

"I've got the most points, right?"

"I've got a couple of crazies here. I want them thrown out."

"Tell me!"

"One's a fat middle-aged man. The other's a girl with bits of tape all over her head."

"Can you just confirm that I am the prettiest contestant?"

"—and that I'm the handsomest," interrupted Irabu.

Shut up! My entire life depends on this audition.

"Listen, I promised Hiromi here that I'd appear in a film with her."

Don't lump me in with you that way. Please don't lump me in with you.

Hands seized the backs of their collars, and a crew of sturdily built security men in uniform lifted them off their feet. Hiromi wriggled as hard as she could, but to no avail. She was carried out of the auditorium. Everything suddenly became bright. She was surprised to hear the sound of a lark singing. Her body went limp. As she looked up into the depths of the clear blue sky, she had an incongruous thought: it was ages since she'd last seen the sky.

She got her hair cut. Boyish, like a buzz cut. She changed the way she dressed and the way she did her makeup. Thick eyeliner and tight skirts didn't go with her short hair. Hiromi started wearing an ordinary pair of jeans for the first time in years. Her sweaters were completely ordinary too.

Looking like this, she was now a trainee at a design company. The agency had terminated her contract and she had lost her modeling job. When she walked around town, nobody turned around to look at her. And it was quite clear that no one was following her either.

It was a sort of exorcism, really.

Her body felt lighter, as if a weight had fallen from her shoulders. She felt refreshed mentally and physically.

But Hiromi was not yet one hundred percent better, so she was still going to the Irabu General Hospital to pick up her prescription.

"It's bizarre. How could they fail me at the paperwork stage, like that?"

It was Irabu. Apparently, the message had not yet got through to him because he was still sending off resumes left, right, and center.

"You've got a profession. You're a doctor. Why should you bother about breaking into entertainment?"

"But I'd like to be on TV at least once." He looked so serious, that Hiromi had to burst out laughing.

"Well, Hiromi, love, how are you feeling?"

"Better—I think. My body seems to feel lighter."

"That, I'm sure, is because you took your armor off."

"My armor?"

"It's a common enough phenomenon. Think of a junior high school kid. A troublemaker. The kid's sent to a new school where he stops combing his hair in an Elvis-style duck's ass. Abracadabra! He suddenly changes back into a cheerful, mild-mannered little boy."

"But Doctor," she protested, "nobody has a duck's ass these days."

Still she understood what he was getting at. Up until now, her makeup and her mini-skirt had served as a sort of armor. And once you'd fitted yourself out with armor like that it was hard to take it off.

"And you don't have stalkers anymore, right?" asked Irabu.

"No, none," said Hiromi with a rueful grin. "But, Doctor, did you believe back when I said there were?"

"Uh-uh. Not a word of it." Irabu shook his head emphatically. "I knew straightaway that you were suffering from a persecution complex. The thing is, there's no point in refusing to acknowledge an illness like that. The treatment really starts with accepting and affirming the illness. I mean, there's no point in just ordering someone who's unable to sleep to go sleep. If you say, 'Well then, if you can't sleep, just stay awake,' that helps the patient relax. And then the patient falls asleep. Same thing."

Hiromi looked at Irabu. Maybe the man was a brilliant doctor after all.

"By the way, I do like your short hair. Ha-ha-ha." He bore down on her with an adoring look in his eyes.

"Doctor, stop it!" said Hiromi sharply, drawing back. "You promised not to."

"Ah, but things are different now that you've cut your hair." He was breathing heavily through his nose.

What sort of twisted logic was that? Here was a man who just didn't know when to quit.

Hiromi used her leg to block his assault, and, just as on another previous occasion, took a good swinging kick. Since it was easy for her to move around in her jeans, she kicked with both feet for good measure.

Irabu and the chair tumbled over backward together. The thump of his head against the floor resounded through the room.

Cell

ONE

He was sending out more than two hundred text messages a day from his cell phone.

It cost him three yen per text, which added up to a total of six hundred yen a day. Since he sent this many every day, his monthly bill—including both the basic charge and the usage fees—easily topped twenty thousand yen.

Yuta Tsuda was in his second year of high school. He got twenty thousand yen a month in pocket money from his parents. "You're an only child. So you're lucky," his friends would tease him. But since he had to use the money to buy his lunch, for all practical purposes it turned out to be a lot less.

His mom would always say, "That's quite enough for you to buy yourself clothes or CDs."

She was totally clueless. High school kids these days could barely keep up with their cell phone bills.

Yuta was more or less managing, thanks to his part-time job at a fast-food joint. He earned nearly fifty thousand a month, with his five three-hour stints a week. That just about brought him up to a level where he really could buy some clothes and CDs.

"Put the two together and that's seventy thousand yen! How much do you think your damn mother doles out to me from my own damn salary each month?"

His father had said that last month, getting angry and going all red in the face. He might earn the money, but Yuta's mom was the one who managed it.

His mother liked to lecture him regularly, once in the morning and once in the evening. "When are you going to get down to some serious studying?" she would say. "You'll be graduating next year, you know."

But as time went on, his parents toned down their criticism. It was because of the spasms Yuta had started getting in his left hand.

It was dinnertime, but Yuta just kept on typing into his phone. "You'd better cut that out, or I'll give you a good slap," his father had threatened.

Yuta paid no attention and continued staring at the little screen of the phone, so his father made good on his promise and slapped him in the head.

"Hey! What are you—" Yuta said.

But his father grabbed his cell phone and flung it onto the living room couch. The atmosphere around the table became tense and oppressive. And it was several minutes later that Yuta's left hand had begun to tremble uncontrollably.

The trembling started in his fingertips and then moved up to his elbow, until finally the whole arm started to jerk up and down, as if he were strumming a banjo.

He made a frantic dash to retrieve his phone. Once he had it firmly in his grasp, the spasm died away.

His mother and father had both gone pale. They swallowed nervously and did not say a word.

"Take the boy to the doctor," said his father curtly. "That one by the railway. Irabu something or other—General Hospital, was it?"

Yuta didn't think it was a big deal. One of his friends had been typing too much on his cell and had got tendonitis. Whatever he had was probably like that. The friend had started using his right hand to type, and since then everything had been okay.

"It scares me, you know, the way you're always holding onto that phone of yours as if your life depended on it."

His mother looked permanently upset. She had remembered that for a while Yuta had briefly refused to go to school, back in junior high.

"I'm too busy with my job. I don't have the time to go see some stupid doctor," he said, hinting at the need for financial compensation. His mother came right back, offering him ten thousand yen on condition that he go see a doctor at this hospital.

Fantastic! And he'd be able to skip some classes.

But he drew the line at letting his mom go with him. He was seventeen, and to go with his mother would be terminally uncool. She told him that she had made him an appointment at the neurology department. Yuta was not all that worried. His experience with hospitals was zilch: he knew that internal medicine and surgery were two different things—that was about it.

The neurology department of the Irabu General Hospital was in the basement. The lobby upstairs had been clean and brightly lit, but down here things were as gross as the locker rooms back at school. It was dark and there was a sour smell.

< Am in the basement. Mega-creepy. >

Using his phone, he dashed off a group text to a few friends who were in class. Of course, he had already texted them the day before to tell them he was going to the hospital.

He knocked on the door. From inside, a high-pitched voice sang out, "Hello, hello! Come right in!"

< Doc said, "Come right in." Mega-creepy x 2. >

He had a real knack for tapping out messages at high speed.

He could do eighty characters a minute. When he had gone to a concert by the all-girl pop group Morning Musume, he'd provided his friends with a running, real-time commentary.

He walked in and was confronted with a fat, middle-aged doctor sitting in an armchair.

< He's a hippo. A hippo! So gross. >

"So, young Master Tsuda, I believe? What's that you're doing there?" asked the doctor, as the flesh under his chin wobbled.

Seemed friendly enough. Yuta looked at the badge on his chest which read, "ICHIRO IRABU, DOCTOR OF NEUROLOGY."

"Me? Oh, er, nothing," replied Yuta blandly as he sat himself down on a stool.

"Right, then. Well, how about an injection to kick off with?"

"Huh?" Yuta's eyes widened.

"Don't worry, young man, don't worry. Your mother's given me a general outline of the problem. Hey, Mayumi."

The preparations for his injection went ahead at breakneck speed.

< Out of nowhere—an injection!! Puke. Puke. >

"It's just glucose. Nothing to worry about."

Yuta put his arm on the support cushion. Something smelled good, and he looked up. The nurse's cleavage was right in front of his eyes.

< Nurse has got monster tits! Can see right down her bra! >

He had an erection in seconds.

"Relax your arm."

The nurse's voice was sullen and unfriendly.

Yuta didn't care. He was a virgin, and this was the first time he had been this close to the soft, fragrant skin of a woman.

He switched his phone from his left to his right hand. The nurse leaned forward. Her thigh emerged from the slit of her skirt.

< Can almost see her panties. Losing control! >

< Am not making this up! It's really happening! >

He felt someone's breath on his neck and turned around to see who it was. The doctor's flushed face was right behind his shoulder.

< Oh no, he saw my text. I'm in trouble now! >

As usual, he just typed whatever he thought, as he thought it. But Irabu did not tell him off. He seemed to be excited about something, and his eyes were fixed on Yuta's left arm.

"I hear you're addicted to your cell phone," said Irabu with a grin that exposed his pale pink gums. Yuta was annoyed by his straightforwardness.

"Nah. Don't think I am."

"I've never actually owned one myself."

Yuta was dumbfounded. Were there still people out there who didn't have cell phones? Even his mom put her cell in her bag before she went out.

"Let me have a look."

Yuta grudgingly handed over his cell. Irabu examined it curiously.

"And how much was it?"

"Ten yen."

Irabu dropped it on the floor. Yuta picked it up in great alarm.

"Because it's an old model." He provided the answer before Irabu had even asked. "If you get the most up-to-date kind with Internet capability, they cost 23,000 yen. But the old ones they sell for next to nothing. It sounds cheap, but with the amount you have to pay each month for the bill, they're making their money back in no time."

"Hmmm," Irabu muttered, playing with his lower lip. "And how do you type these text thingies on your phone?"

What a bore! But Yuta showed him what to do, without letting on how he felt.

"It's amazing. You've got so few buttons, but still you're able to change the text into kanji characters."

Irabu's eyes were shining like a child. He played around for a while, pushing all the buttons on the keypad.

"Wow! It's even got pictures. There's a smiley face and a crying face."

"Those are just for junior high school kids. My friends and I, we know what we're doing, so we use proper characters," replied Yuta with disdain. In his circle, they teased people for using those stupid icons.

"And this hole. What's it for?" Irabu inquired.

"You stick the jack for the flash into it. With the latest phones, you can take pictures and send them to people."

"Unbelievable! And have you got a flash?"

"Yeah, sure."

Yuta took it out of his pocket and showed it to him. It looked like a little plastic toy.

Irabu grinned. "Come on then. Take me. Take me." He pressed the cell phone into Yuta's hands and made a peace sign with his fingers.

Could this weirdo really be a doctor? Still, what could he do? Yuta pressed the button and showed Irabu the screen with his image on it. Irabu snorted with joy. He was all excited. Adults aren't supposed to behave like this, thought Yuta.

< This is my hippo of a doctor! >

Since he had taken a picture, he sent it off as soon as he had the chance.

"So where can I buy myself one of these?"

Irabu had taken the cell back from Yuta. Didn't he know *anything*?

"All the electronics stores have them. And you can get them in some convenience stores too."

"It works! It works!" Irabu had made a phone call without even asking him. "Just the number for the weather forecast."

Honestly, running up his bill like that!

"Shall we try calling the police, just for fun?"

"No, don't do that. They keep records of where the calls come from."

There was no sign that Irabu planned to give his cell back. He clutched it in his left hand, and fiddled with the keypad buttons with his fat sausage fingers.

"So can you play video games on it too?"

"Hey, um, be careful not to erase the memory or anything." Yuta was getting agitated.

Irabu focused intently on the cell. He was like a man possessed.

After ten minutes, Yuta started feeling restless. Perhaps someone had sent him a text? At break time he usually got texts from somebody.

"Sorry, Doctor, but could you give it back?"

There was no reply, so Yuta repeated his request. Irabu was now fooling around, trying out the ringtones.

Yuta's left hand started to twitch. Beads of greasy sweat formed on his forehead. He stretched out his hand.

"Doctor, please."

"Just a little more." Irabu turned his shoulder as if to block him.

What was wrong with this guy? He was just like a child. As selfish as an elementary-school kid. The pounding in Yuta's chest grew stronger. His lips were dry.

"Doctor, give it back." He stood up and plucked the phone from Irabu's hand.

"Oh, sorry, very sorry." Irabu came back to himself. "I was off in my own little world."

Yuta went limp. He gave a small sigh. His body, he realized, was drenched in sweat.

"Suppose I'd better hurry up and get one of my own!" said Irabu, laughing uproariously. "Well, I think that'll do for today. See you tomorrow, okay?"

Did that mean he was supposed to come here again tomorrow? He gave another little sigh.

"Thank you, Doctor." Yuta bowed and went out into the corridor. Mayumi, the nurse, was sitting on a bench smoking a cigarette. Her legs were crossed, and her dress had ridden up, exposing her thighs.

On second thought, Yuta said to himself, *I can come here again, no problem*.

"Excuse me, Miss?" He addressed her timidly. "Miss, could you possibly tell me your cell phone number? So I can text you."

It seemed less forward if he specified that he was just going to text her. Even without Mayumi, Yuta probably had about a hundred girl mail buddies.

"Don't have a cell phone," answered Mayumi in a bored tone as she glanced up at him.

Yuta could not believe his ears. Irabu was an old man, so he was a write-off anyway, but as far as he could see, Mayumi was only twenty-two or twenty-three.

There was something extraordinary about meeting two people in a row who didn't have cell phones. The big question was: without a cell, how could she have a relationship?

"Well, would you mind if I took your picture then?"

"No photos!" She refused him curtly. Mayumi crushed her cigarette out in the ashtray. Once again he saw her cleavage. He felt it down around his groin. He stood rooted to the spot.

"Why are you still here?" Mayumi asked him, scratching at her neck. He shook his head and beat a retreat. This hospital was completely bizarre—the doctors and the nurses both.

When he got to school, Yuta lost no time in giving his classmates an update.

"I'm telling you, the nurse, she was a stunner—really sexy. The top three buttons of her dress must have been undone."

"Are there really nurses like that out there? You sure you're not making all this up?"

"I tell you it was real. And I practically saw her nipples."

"Sure, you did. Yeah. And I bet she was wearing a miniskirt too."

"Quite the private show, huh?"

"Did they charge you extra for that?"

It was a chorus of mockery. Yuta decided to take a sneak photo of Mayumi the next day. Once they'd seen her picture, they'd all be lining up to become patients."Hey, Yuta, did you get Glay's new CD?" It was his good friend Hiroshi."Course I did," he said.

"I'll bring in my mini disc player tomorrow. Can you make me a copy?" Yosuke put his hands together in a gesture of supplication.

"No problem," Yuta replied in a spirit of generosity.

"Hey, Yuta, what about Ringo Shiina's new song?" butted in Shinpei, another friend.

"Yeah, I got it. 'Course."

Yuta lolled back in his chair as if he were sucking on a cigarette.

"Can you make me a copy of that?"

"Sure, you bet." He kindly accepted this request too.

"Have you bought Shikao Suga?" a third friend, Naoya, asked him.

"Nah, not yet."

"Hurry up and get it. Then lend it to me," said Naoya, poking him in the shoulder.

Yuta felt a bit peeved, but answered that he'd get it as soon as he got paid and just kept on chatting.

Yuta bought more than ten CDs—singles and albums—a month. It ended up costing him somewhere between ten and fifteen thousand yen. On the high side for a high school student.

He usually bought songs that looked likely to top the charts. It was a way of guaranteeing that he would be at the center of the conversation whenever people were talking about music.

It made him feel good when his friends depended on him like this. Since girls had started asking him to lend them his music, he had recently gone so far as to buy something by Masaharu Fukuyama, whom he didn't even like.

Yuta just could not understand the people who listened to minor Western music. Some of his classmates liked that rock-and-roll singer Björk. That was why he had nothing to talk to them about.

"Hey! Just got a text from that girl at the trade school. She says we should all go out for a group date," exclaimed Hiroshi, peering down at his phone.

"Why'd she text *you*?" Naoya asked.

They all had their cells in their hands as they talked. Yuta was using his left thumb to type a text message. He had mail buddies he'd met on Internet sites, but never actually met physically.

The time Yuta enjoyed most was the time he spent hanging out with his friends. The fact that he was not alone gave him a sense of security, and the more people he chatted to, the more friends he would make.

He probably had about thirty close friends. If he waited in front of the station for an hour after school had finished, he would bump into any number of people he knew. They would all be happy to see him: "Hi there, Yuta!"

It was good to have a wide circle of friends. But keeping friendships going took time and money. Yuta had decided to regard that expenditure as an investment.

TWO

When Yuta arrived at the neurology department the next day, Irabu was waiting for him with a vast array of cell phones lined up on his desk.

"Will you show me how to use these?"

Yuta was flabbergasted. Irabu had all the latest models by all the different makers.

"Doctor, isn't this—ah—overdoing it a bit?"

"I didn't know which kind to buy," he said with a grin.

Irabu hadn't been pretending; he knew nothing at all, including how to send texts. Yuta set everything up and created an email address and a password for him.

"All righty, then, Yuta. I'm going to try to send a text to your phone."

Irabu started poking at the buttons with his fat fingers. After a little while, when Yuta showed him the screen announcing that a new message had been received, Irabu was so thrilled he could not keep still.

"Okay. Your turn. Send one to me."

Sheer force of habit made Yuta send the message: < Let's be mail buddies! > Irabu smiled coyly at him and formed a circle with his index finger and thumb to say "O.K."

Yuta no longer had any idea why he was here in the hospital. What had happened to the idea that he was ill?

"Very good," said Irabu. "Well, how about an injection then? Mayumi!"

Yuta suddenly remembered that today was the day he had planned to take Mayumi's photo. Discreetly attaching the flash, he switched his phone over to his right hand. Then he placed his left arm on the armrest and waited for Mayumi to lean forward.

She rubbed his arm with disinfectant. The needle went in. Yuta felt someone's hot breath on his neck. He turned to discover Irabu's face level with his own. What the hell was he up to?

But he hadn't the time to worry about that. Mayumi's cleavage was on display today too.

A beautiful smell wafted into his nostrils. He felt a strong desire to reach out and grab her. He put his finger on the button. A sharp pain surged through his left arm, and he let out an involuntary shriek.

"Whoops, so sorry. Must have missed the vein," said Mayumi. Her tone was not even remotely apologetic. She reached over to release the rubber tubing from Yuta's upper arm. As she did so her hand slipped and smacked into Yuta's cell phone. It was knocked from his grasp and went clattering across the floor.

"Oh, what a shame!" Mayumi stood back up again. She didn't offer a word of apology, but looked down at Yuta with eyes that were ice-cold. "Got to do it all over again. Let's hope the needle doesn't break inside you." It was clearly a threat.

She had seen through him. Yuta aborted his plan. He fled from the room, taking care not to catch her eye. Mayumi was definitely a firecracker. He wondered whether she had a boyfriend.

At school, he and his friends were hanging out, making plans. He usually spent any free periods hanging out with his friends. He had a classmate once who used to just read mysteries all by himself. It was hard for him to believe that anyone would choose to spend their time that way.

"Is it interesting?" he had once asked the guy.

"Yup." The reply had definitely *not* been interesting.

Yuta couldn't remember when he had last read a novel. An hour was too long for him to sit still and concentrate on something.

"Our group date with the girls from the trade school?" Hiroshi was sitting cross-legged on his desk. "It's ended up as four of them, and four of us. You three—Shinpei, Naoya, and Yuta—I hope you're looking forward to it."

"You'll have hell to pay if they're a bunch of dogs."

"Get them to send us their photo."

"Great idea. Let's send them ours too."

The four of them squeezed together to fit into the frame. Then they sent off a picture message to the girls.

During all this, they all kept typing messages. Yuta's cell didn't seem to be working very well. He kept getting a message saying that the transmission had failed. His text message function was on the blink.

He thought it was because he had dropped it at the hospital. To make matters worse, he was having trouble receiving texts too. Incoming texts triggered an error message, which then caused texts to auto-erase.

He got Hiroshi to text him, as a test. It didn't come through.

Yuta started to feel nervous. He worried that some important text might not have reached him.

He tried phoning another friend from school. "Did you text me?"

"No. Why? Something wrong with your cell?"

"Seems like it's broken."

"Oh, really?" his friend said, in an uninterested way.

He called several more people. They all gave the same reply: "Nope, didn't text you today."

This, of course, was just a coincidence. Every day he would receive loads of texts, though admittedly he did get a lot fewer than he sent out.

He made some more calls. Finally even the basic telephone function started messing up. He would punch in a number and just get the beep-beep of the busy signal.

"Hey, Naoya, lend me your phone, will you?"

"No way."

Naoya turned him down flat. Hiroshi and Shinpei, who were busy texting people themselves, ignored him.

In the end he couldn't even turn his cell phone on. It had become dead weight.

Afternoon lessons were torture for Yuta.

He knew that friends of his must be wondering why their texts weren't getting through to him. Some of them might even be getting upset. Perhaps his girl mail buddies had given up on him and were already starting to look for someone to replace him with.

The thought made him crazy.

He looked around. A number of boys and girls had propped up their textbooks and were using them as shields, behind which they fiddled with their cell phones. Under normal circumstances, he'd be doing the same thing.

The sweat had started oozing from his face. He could feel his heart pounding faster. He belched several times, and one foot started jiggling violently against the floor.

The minute classes were over, he'd go buy himself a new cell phone. He didn't have enough money to get the latest model, but if he went for the same one as before, then they were as good as free. The paperwork to get a new one should take about half an hour; he could start using it right then and there.

His left hand started to shake. *Oh no*, he thought to himself, and pressed it under his butt, against the chair. He gritted his teeth in an effort to control the jittery feeling that was overtaking his entire body.

"Hey," he whispered to Hiroshi who was sitting next to him. "I got to ask you a favor."

Hiroshi looked over at him and said, "What's wrong with you? You look pale." He sounded concerned.

"Can you text message Yamada at the West School and Takahashi at the North School, and tell them, 'Yuta Tsuda's phone is on the blink'?"

"Why, you supposed to meet them or something?"

"No."

"Then what for?"

"They're probably worried because their texts aren't getting through to me."

Hiroshi frowned. "Who cares? I mean, if their texts don't get through, they'll just stop trying to send them."

"Hey, you two over there!" shouted the teacher angrily from the front of the class. The two of them ducked their heads down. Hiroshi put away his cell.

He was sweating uncontrollably. He didn't think he'd be able to wait until the end of class. He decided to sneak home without permission at the end of this class. The electronics shop right in front of the station would have every kind of cell phone there was.

He swallowed. No, he couldn't wait even five minutes. Who knows how many of his friends were trying to call, and unable to get through to him right now? He probably had some important text messages too.

Yuta was overwhelmed by anxiety. It was the first time this had ever happened. He crammed his exercise book into his bag and swung the bag quietly over his shoulder.

Hiroshi looked on in a state of shock. "Are you going to take off in the middle of the lesson?"

He didn't reply. While the teacher was facing the blackboard, he scuttled over to the door at the back of the classroom, staying in a half-crouch. The few classmates who noticed looked on wide-eyed.

He quietly eased open the door and slipped out into the corridor. The teacher had noticed nothing. Yuta realized that the secret to not being spotted was to act on the spur of the moment.

He left the school building and leapt aboard a city bus.

As Yuta clutched his new cell phone, he couldn't help thinking his own behavior had been a little strange. It hadn't really been necessary to sneak out of class like that. A few minutes either way didn't really make that much difference, so why the great hurry?

As soon as he got his new phone, he texted all his friends. He explained that his phone had stopped working, and he apologized for having been out of touch. But the reaction he got was cool, with most people texting him to say they hadn't noticed.

It was some consolation when Emi, a girl at his part-time job told him, "I know how you must have felt. When I lost my cell, I went into a total panic."

Yuta thought that if he lost his, he'd probably black out.

"By the way," Emi continued, "all the part-timers are going out tonight to karaoke. You want to come?"

"Love to." He agreed right away.

"Great, it'll be fun to have you," Emi said with a smile.

Yuta had never once refused an invitation to go out with people. If he thought that something fun was happening somewhere where he wasn't, he was simply unable to say no.

Yuta cooked french fries in the kitchen of the burger joint. He just had to do it according to the instruction booklet, so the work was simple. He kept his cell in his pocket, so he could check his inbox if he had even a few seconds free.

His cell was alerting him that he had a message. He looked to see who it was from. It was from Irabu.

< We had nice weather today. >

What the hell should he write back to that? He decided to forget about it.

A minute passed, and another text arrived from Irabu.

< Let's hope we have nice weather tomorrow too! >

Irabu was obviously thrilled to pieces at having learned how to use his cell.

< Let's hope we get nice weather the day after tomorrow too! >

The texts just kept on coming. It was a really strange way for a grown-up to behave.

It was just too stupid, so he decided to ignore him. If it had been Mayumi texting him, he would have replied in a flash.

He got off work at six o'clock and went straight to the karaoke place. He sent a short text to his mother: < Skipping dinner tonight. > The way you could announce what you planned to do without consulting anyone was one of the wonderful things about cell phones.

His cousin who was in his fourth year at university had told him once that back when he was in high school nobody had had a cell phone. High school students in the old days must have had to actually call their parents to let them know whenever they were going to be back late. Yuta couldn't even imagine what a hassle it must have been.

"Okay, Yuta, you start us off," announced Emi.

Yuta would have preferred to sing later, when the ice had already been broken, but it wouldn't be fair to his friends if he were a bad sport. He sprang to his feet, clasping the mike, and his friends responded with shouts of "Go for it!" and "Yea, Yuta!"

"Have they got the new song by Ken Hirai here?" Yuta asked.

"You're kidding. Can you sing it already?"

They checked, and it was already in the play-list. Yuta guessed that since the song was so new it would be the first time for any of them to hear it at karaoke. As Yuta launched into it, he could read the surprise in their faces. It made him feel good.

When it came to karaoke, Yuta was always very quick. As soon as a new single was released, he would buy it, listen to it over and over again, and then practice it. It wasn't cheap, but since it earned him the respect of his friends, he couldn't imagine stopping.

As he finished the song, he struck a clownish pose. Keeping things funny was the key to being well-liked.

"Hey, Yuta, lend me the CD, will you?"

Once again people needed him and depended on him. To be honest, sometimes he thought it was rather a nuisance, but since he didn't want anyone to think he was stingy with his money or his time, he grinned and answered, "Sure, no problem."

There was one new face that day: a boy called Koji, in a posh private-school uniform. The girls pressed the mike on him, and he sang the new song by the Gospellers.

To Yuta's great chagrin, the song was from a CD he hadn't bought yet.

To make matters worse, Koji was wearing new Nike sneakers. They were brand new and had just been featured in the style magazines, so it was Yuta's first time to see the real thing.

He had to buy himself a pair. But they must have cost twenty thousand yen.

I'll work more hours, he thought. *If I just do one extra hour every day, it will be enough for me to get more new clothes and shoes.*

Koji came over and sat down beside him. He was cheerful, clapping Yuta on the back, talking to him like they were old friends.

"Let's see your watch." He took hold of Yuta's left wrist. "Ah-hah. One of those G-Shock anniversary models, yeah? Cool."

Yuta knew perfectly well why Koji had mentioned it. Koji was also wearing a G-Shock, but his was the diver's watch, a collector's item.

"Yours is the cool one," responded Yuta dutifully, though inside he was steaming.

"What kind of jeans are those?" Koji inspected the tag in back. "Oh, Levis. Vintage."

From the tone of his voice, Yuta could tell that Koji probably had some better ones. And no doubt he'd be wearing them next time. But Yuta wouldn't be beaten so easily. He'd go to a second-hand clothes shop in Shibuya and get some even more fricking unique vintage jeans.

I'll work every day of the winter break if I have to, he said to himself. *I don't want to have less stuff than my friends.*

"Hey, can you ski?" somebody asked him.

"Never been."

"We're planning a ski trip."

"Great. I'll go with you. Yup, sounds good," he said without missing a beat.

I can go round to see Granny and get her to give me some money on the sly, he thought. *God, high school is so expensive!*

When he went to the hospital the next day, Irabu was sulking.

"Why don't you reply to my texts?"

Clearly, he wasn't happy to be ignored.

Last night, when Yuta had checked for new messages, he saw there were over a hundred. He had a bad feeling about it, though, and sure enough, most of them were from Irabu.

< About to have a bath. >

< Just got out of bath. >

< Had a hamburger for dinner. >

< Left my carrots, but my mom got angry! >

How was he supposed to reply to messages like that? This doctor was supposed to be an actual grown-up. He was getting on in years, but Yuta suspected he probably wasn't even married.

"I was busy at my job, and then I had some homework to do." His excuse struck him as ridiculous even as he said it.

"But it's so nasty not to send me even one reply."

Yuta could relate to that. He himself only received a reply to about one of every five texts he sent out. Since his own response rate was one hundred percent, he sometimes felt it was unfair.

"I'm sorry . . ." He bowed his head, hoping they could change the subject.

"Not to worry. I'm fed up with cell phones anyway," Irabu said, scratching his neck noisily.

Come to think of it, there was no cell phone on his desk. And no sign of one in his pockets either.

"Where's your cell, Doctor?"

"In the drawer," he said, with a jerk of his chin. "There's no point in having a cell phone if you've got no one to call you, right?"

Irabu looked sad. So there were people in the world with no one to get in touch with them!

"Doctor, would you like me to text you when I have the time?" he blurted out from pure pity.

"Will you really?" Irabu's eyes shone with delight. "That would be wonderful. Thank you so much." He grasped Yuta's hand and pumped it vigorously up and down.

Yuta was no longer sure why he was coming to the hospital.

He had an injection that day too. Mayumi was as unfriendly as ever.

The injection over and done with, and Irabu out of the room, Yuta screwed up his courage and asked, "Mayumi, have you got a boyfriend?"

She stared at him in silence.

"What about coming to karaoke sometime?" He gave her a comically pathetic look. "Whoops—what have I gone and said?"

Mayumi was putting out some new syringes and vials.

"Deep down, you're a pretty sad character—" she muttered.

Yuta gave a start.

"—and you keep chatting all the time because you're terrified that someone might find out what you're really like."

"Oh, Mayumi, don't spoil things by getting all serious. I meant it as a joke."

"You're sweating."

"I am not. What are you talking about?" Yuta tried to laugh it off, but his face was frozen.

"Life's hard for you high school kids nowadays," Mayumi said, dropping down into a chair and lighting a cigarette. She crossed her legs, and her dress rode up, exposing her thighs. She stared lazily at the smoke she blew out of her mouth.

THREE

A kid in another class had asked Yuta a favor. He'd asked him to put together a mix of songs for him on CD, since he was going to have a party.

Yuta had, naturally, agreed. He chose the most upbeat songs from the CDs he already had, and went and bought new CDs where his collection fell short. It cost him about ten thousand yen, but more important than the money was knowing that he'd widened his network of friends at school.

At work, Emi asked him to lend her his watch, saying, "When I borrow stuff from you, I always know it's good quality."

This put him in a good mood, so he bought even more G-Shocks for his collection. He lent a pair of his jeans—a discontinued line—to Koji. "You're awesome," Koji had said in a tone of respect.

Irabu kept sending him tons of texts every day, but after a while it started to slow down. After Yuta had taught him how to use online dating sites, Irabu had posed as a "twenty-six-year-old doctor," and was apparently very popular.

He consulted Yuta. "The girls all say they want to meet me. I wonder what I should do?"

Yuta warned him that it was best not to follow things up.

"What kind of counseling are you getting at the hospital?" his mother asked him.

Counseling? He had no idea. Being able to skip class was all he was concerned about. And he was still sending out texts at his usual rate of two hundred per day. For him it was like breathing. There was nothing he could do.

It was a Saturday, and he had three different plans lined up all on the same day.

After school ended at lunchtime, he was supposed to go to a J-League soccer game with Miki, a friend from his junior high, and some guys he knew. Then in the evening there was mahjong with Hiroshi and his crew; at the same time some people from work were going to karaoke.

It never occurred to Yuta to choose just one of the three. When somebody went to the trouble of inviting him someplace, he couldn't very well say no. Not to mention that he was proud of the fact that his schedule was full. He always got nervous if he had nothing planned.

He made a point of telling Hiroshi to find one more person, so they could play runner-up-out.

"Nah, that's boring," Hiroshi grumbled. "Look, I'll just invite Tetsu from fifth period, and then you don't need to come."

"Hey, don't be like that. I do want to play, you know." Yuta just barely managed to convince him.

The second school was over, he caught a bus and headed for the train station.

< Had rice omelet for lunch >, came Irabu's text.

Hasn't he got anything better to do? thought Yuta. But on the other hand, he was kind of glad to discover that an adult like Irabu could exist. As he stood swaying gently with the motion of the bus, a middle-aged man came up and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hey! You can't use your cell phone on the bus."

"But I'm only sending text messages."

"It's the electromagnetic waves that are the problem. If anybody happens to have a pacemaker, then—"

Show him to me! Where is he, then? Yuta wanted to say, but when he saw all the other grown-ups looking at him disapprovingly, he backed down and switched off the phone.

I'll make it. I'm sure I will. Yuta was a little nervous. They were supposed to meet at the station turnstile at one o'clock and then buy same-day tickets for the game. That was why they couldn't just meet inside the stadium.

Beads of sweat formed on his brow. He wiped them away with the back of his hand. The sweat was not like normal sweat; it was cold.

What was going on? Yuta felt his pulse starting to race. A feeling of panic swept over him.

The station at one o'clock, the station at one o'clock, he repeated to himself in a whisper.

Uh-oh, he thought. He had just realized there were two sets of turnstiles at the station—east and west—and he hadn't been told which one they were meeting at.

It didn't matter. Last time he'd met Miki it had been at the east exit. Since Miki hadn't mentioned anything about the exit, it must be the same one.

He flipped open his phone. He noticed the same old geezer giving him a hard look. He sighed and put it back in his pocket. If only he could contact Miki, he could sort everything out.

Yuta checked his watch. There was still plenty of time. He decided to get off the bus halfway there and call Miki straightaway.

Trouble was, Miki's phone was switched off. Maybe he was on the bus too.

"This is Yuta. We're meeting at the east exit, right? Call or text me to let me know. Bye," was the message he left.

Who had decided that buses and trains were off-limits to cell phones? Why have a cell at all, if you couldn't use it? Being able to get in touch with people anytime you wanted was the whole point.

Yuta caught the next bus. He was checking his inbox when he heard another complete stranger bossing him around.

"Excuse me, sir, but no cell phones on board the bus."

This time it was the driver. The sneaky bastard must have been watching him in the rearview mirror.

Yuta grudgingly switched off his cell. Still clutching it, he looked out of the window. Soon he noticed that his left hand was trembling. A belch rose in his throat.

Even he knew that this wasn't normal. Just having the thing switched off filled him with anxiety. He gritted his teeth, but he couldn't stand it for even a minute.

Yuta got off the bus a second time and checked his inbox.

< For dessert I had chocolate parfait. > It was from Irabu.

Shit! There were no texts from his friends.

Yuta decided he would run to the station. There was a chance he'd be late that way, but the thought of switching off his phone frightened him more.

He kept dialing as he ran through the streets, but Miki's phone was still off.

There was a bicycle on the pavement. It was a woman's bike that had obviously been abandoned, and its lock was broken. Yuta clambered on without any hesitation and sped toward the station.

On a residential street he cycled past a police car coming the other way. He tried his best to act nonchalant. But he must have looked guilty somehow, since the cop car did a U-turn and a voice came over the microphone, ordering him to stop.

Of course he made a run for it. But they came after him and had no trouble catching him.

Why did this have to happen? He wasn't a hooligan or a pervert. He was just an innocent high school kid hurrying to meet some friends on time.

He told them straight out that he'd borrowed an abandoned bicycle without asking because he thought he was going to be late.

"Borrow" was not considered quite the right term, so Yuta found himself being led off to the local police station.

He checked his inbox in the backseat of the police car.

< Had a nice cup of Darjeeling. >

Unbelievable. Did the man ever do any work? What freak accident had produced somebody like him?

At the station, he managed to keep the officers from calling his school, but he would still need to be picked up by a parent or guardian.

He pretended that both his parents worked and called his grandmother. She hurried over in a taxi, but she told him, with a very serious expression on her face, that she was going to have to inform his mother.

Who cares, provided he could get out of here?

Yuta pressed on to the soccer stadium. He knew the game would be over when he got there, but he'd promised his friends, and a promise was a promise. They were sure to be worried about him: after all, he hadn't shown up to meet them.

He checked over and over, but there was no message from Miki. He tried Miki, but the phone was still switched off.

Maybe there'd been an accident of some sort. He didn't know the other members of the group very well, so he didn't have their cell phone numbers.

When he got there, the game had ended and spectators were pouring out of the stadium.

He stood by the main gate and looked for his friends. He knew there wasn't much chance of finding them: the crowd must have been over ten thousand. Yuta looked down at the cell phone in his hand. It looked to him like an enormous dead insect.

Yuta even began to suspect that there was something wrong with it; maybe he couldn't receive any incoming calls or texts.

He called Hiroshi and asked him to try calling back. His phone rang just fine, and the call came through. "You're obsessed with your cell phone," grumbled Hiroshi. Yuta, however, was relieved. "Oh, by the way," Hiroshi continued, "the place we usually go for mahjong is being redecorated. We're going to go a place Tetsu knows. We'll start without you, so give us a call when you're nearby." Hiroshi told him what the nearest station was.

Yuta decided to head back into town by train.

He checked his inbox repeatedly on the train. There were some messages, but they were all non-urgent things from mail buddies.

His phone rang. It was Emi.

"We've decided which karaoke place we're going to tonight. Let me tell you."

Just the sound of her voice was enough to make him happy. He was definitely "in" with his friends.

"Can we bring food in with us? If we can, I was going to drop by work and swipe us some french fries, cookies, things like that," Yuta said excitedly.

"What? No hamburgers?"

"Hey, I'd feel guilty toward your fans if I was responsible for you putting on any weight!" He was really making her laugh now. "What's that? You've already had three beef bowls at Yoshinoya? I think that's more than enough." Emi was laughing away merrily.

"What's that? You don't want anything sweet? Doesn't sound like the Emi I know—"

"Shut it!"

Someone had grabbed his arm. He turned around to find a young man—pretty scary-looking too—glowering at him.

"Oh, ah, sorry." *Might as well make a preemptive apology*, he thought. "Okay, Emi, see you later." He turned off his phone.

There were three of them, and each of them looked like trouble. Yuta went pale. He looked around, but all the other passengers were busily pretending not to notice anything.

One of the guys tore the cell phone from Yuta's hand.

"Little brat! It's brand-new." The young man stuffed the cell into the pocket of his leather jacket.

The three slouched off the train at the next station.

"Hey, give it back—please!" Yuta dashed after them. He chased them down the stairs and out of the station.

Casting an occasional glance back at him, they made for the parking lot. If he kept on following them, he realized, they were sure to steal his money next. Since he'd been planning to go to a soccer game, and mahjong and karaoke were still to come, he had almost twenty thousand yen on him.

His mobile had cost only him ten yen.

Oh well, time to buy another one! It was a pain in the ass, but he couldn't risk getting beaten up. It would suck if he got seriously hurt.

Yuta decided to let it go. He turned and ran back to the station. When he got to the main station he'd find an electronics store and buy a cell phone. When your cell got stolen, they made you fill out lots of stupid paperwork, so he decided to just say he'd lost it. The charge would be two thousand yen. Yuta knew pretty much all there was to know about cell phones.

There was no problem with getting a new one and canceling his old number.

But there was a catch: he wouldn't be able to start using it till Monday. There were some outstanding charges on his old phone. Until those were paid off, the new phone couldn't be activated.

What the hell! They were telling him that he'd have to survive till Monday with no cell phone? Yuta's vision was a little blurry, and his left arm started twitching.

Had he known, he'd have been better off having a showdown with the three older kids. His adrenaline would have kicked in, and he probably could have taken them all.

He darted into the phone booth in front of the station to call Hiroshi and Emi.

Then he realized he didn't know their phone numbers. All the numbers he usually called were programmed into his cell. That meant he didn't actually need to remember any of them himself.

By now he was very late for both appointments. Everybody must be worried.

He was having trouble breathing, and he felt a stabbing pain in his chest. He took a train to the station Hiroshi had mentioned. Then he realized there was another problem: he hadn't gotten the name of the mahjong place.

Yuta and his friends made their plans based on the assumption they could use their cell phones to get in touch whenever they needed to. Basically it meant that they never really arranged things properly in advance.

Yuta walked along the main street, picking places at random. Whenever he saw a sign for mahjong, he'd go in and look around, but since this was a student neighborhood, there were just too many of them.

He thought he'd go see Emi, then. Either way, it'd be good to see a friend's face.

He took the train again, one station further, and found the karaoke box where Emi said they'd be.

Yeah, but which room were they in? Without his cell, he had no way of tracking them down. He peeped through the glass into each room, but he couldn't find them.

He described Emi and her friends to the staff. "Thing is, you see, it's Saturday night tonight. We've been full since early on in the evening, so some groups gave up and moved on elsewhere," was the reply.

The place had been crowded, so they could have made a snap decision to switch venues. Normally this was exactly the sort of information that would come in to his cell phone.

Everything had been in place today for him to go out and have a good time with three different sets of friends, and still he was all alone.

He had a sudden inspiration, and tried calling Miki from a public phone. Since Miki was an old friend, he actually knew his home number.

"Oh, Yuta, is that you? So what did you get up to today?" It was Miki himself who answered the phone. He sounded very laid-back.

"Sorry I couldn't make it. I stole a bike, and the cops picked me up."

"Sounds like you had an eventful day!" Miki was laughing.

"I called you a million times, and texted you too."

"Sorry. My bad. I forgot to take my cell phone with me today."

Yuta didn't know what to say. Miki was actually able to forget his cell phone, and go out without it?

"And what about the game?"

"It was good. Hooked up with some friends from school, since you didn't show up," Miki said breezily.

So he hadn't worried about him at all?

"You could have texted me or something, couldn't you?" protested Yuta.

"Like I said, I forgot my cell."

"You could have borrowed one from somebody."

"What are you getting so worked up about? All that happened is we didn't manage to meet up."

"*All* that happened is . . ."

"Let's go together some other time, okay?"

Miki was totally unfazed: as unconcerned as if he'd gone and forgotten one of those cheap plastic umbrellas somewhere.

Yuta hung up and continued roaming the streets. He turned up the collar of his pea jacket and breathed into his cupped hands.

He was still clutching his cell, although it was useless to him.

Today he'd failed to meet either Emi or Hiroshi. He felt ashamed of having broken his promises and frustrated that he was the only one to have missed out.

His head ached. It felt like his guts were wriggling and squirming around inside him. Yuta stopped walking and vomited a little on the asphalt. A sour taste rose in his throat, and his eyes filled with tears.

No cell phone until Monday! He couldn't get in touch with anybody! He felt like he'd been abandoned and was alone in the universe.

FOUR

Yuta was now sending over three hundred texts a day.

He couldn't put his phone down, even for a second. He had absolutely no interest in his lessons, but was avid about using his little keypad.

He'd arranged to meet three different sets of friends last Saturday, but failed to meet any of them. That had been depressing, but what was even worse was the indifference his friends had shown.

Not just Miki, but Hiroshi and Emi too.

On Sunday morning, he had called Hiroshi to explain why he hadn't made it and to say he was sorry. "Oh, no problem," said Hiroshi, who obviously couldn't care less. "Tetsu from fifth period was there. He's a bastard, though, that Tetsu! He did a clean sweep on me. Next week we're going to have a rematch—I'll make sure we do—and I'll get my revenge."

It was clear that Hiroshi was thrilled to have found a new friend.

Emi had apparently still been asleep when he called. Her voice was muffled and ill-tempered as she said, "It doesn't matter. No need to apologize about something like that."

"I thought you'd have been lonely with me not there, you know?"

Yuta was trying to be funny, but she gave him short shrift.

"Koji brought along some friends from private school. We had a great time."

The biggest shock of all was discovering that neither Hiroshi nor Emi had even tried texting him.

"See, I haven't been able to use my cell at all since last night," said Yuta, as a way of apologizing for not getting in touch.

"Oh yeah?" they had both said. Clearly neither of them was too interested.

So he was the only one who'd been trying to make contact. The others had simply counted him out and gone on to have a good time.

He had thought of himself as a key member of the group, but he wasn't. He was always texting his friends, but he didn't have their respect.

For a second he thought maybe he should stop texting them altogether, but fear prevailed. If he didn't keep doing it—whether they replied or not—he would be ignored completely.

"Look, we're in the same class, so you can just tell me things when you see me," Hiroshi had said to him.

"Hey, I see you every day after school, don't I?" Emi looked annoyed.

His father swore at him, "Christ, you're a goddam addict. You're obsessed with that cell phone of yours. You need help, boy."

But still he couldn't stop.

He spent sixteen hours a day fixated on his cell phone. The rest of the time he was asleep.

"I'm tired of it," Irabu said like a spoiled child.

It occurred to Yuta that he hadn't been getting many messages recently from Irabu. Apparently the doctor had switched off all his phones, and they were now hibernating in the depths of his desk drawer.

"With those dating sites or mail buddies, when push comes to shove, I don't actually want to meet any of them."

"But they give you a chance to make more friends. You've got to admit that's fun?" Yuta argued for the other side.

"But I don't want to meet anybody. It's too much trouble."

"Doctor, have you got any friends?"

"Not really," Irabu replied coolly.

Yuta hadn't really expected Irabu to have loads of friends, but he was surprised at how nonchalantly the guy admitted he didn't. Nobody in Yuta's world was like that. If they were ever asked if they had lots of friends, they'd insist that they did."So, what do you on your days off?"

"Recently I've been getting into making models. Tamiya's 1:24-scale tank series, you know. I'm building a Tiger and a Rommel at the same time. Hee-hee-hee!"

Irabu was grinning. Yuta gave a deep sigh.

"I just wanted to say—um—my father said I was addicted to my cell phone. Like, obsessed. Do you think he's right?"

"Hmm." Irabu drew his head into his shoulders and crossed his arms on his chest. "Maybe he is. But does it really matter? I don't think it's doing you any harm."

"Yeah . . ."

"My philosophy is: if something's not harming a person, then let it be."

But it was harming him: it was *soooo* expensive!

It was time for another injection. Mayumi was as unfriendly as ever. She jabbed the needle roughly into him. It seemed to hurt more and more every time.

"Mayumi, do you have any friends?" He blurted out the question as he rubbed his arm.

Mayumi slowly raised her eyes.

"Nah."

She said it as though it were no big deal, just like Irabu.

But Mayumi wasn't the same as Irabu. She was a young woman. At her age, she should be hanging out with her friends and having fun.

"But aren't you lonely?" asked Yuta, looking into her eyes.

"Sure, I guess," she said.

"So why then?"

"Well, I like being on my own. It's easier." Mayumi pondered, tilting her head one way, and then the next. She looked hard at Yuta.

"You don't really have any friends, do you?"

"Yes, I do." Yuta nodded emphatically. "I've got loads of friends. Yes, and this coming Saturday I'm meeting people too. It's all arranged."

"Well, isn't that wonderful for you." She clearly didn't believe him.

But were Irabu and Mayumi both comfortable with not having any friends? And how could they be so open about it?

Christmas was coming, and Yuta had no plans at all for the holiday.

Since they were still only in high school, not many of the guys he knew were doing the traditional thing and spending the night with their girlfriends; nonetheless everybody had something arranged.

Hiroshi was planning a party with the girls from the trade school. Shinpei and Naoya had already been invited. "Because there are four girls coming," Hiroshi had heard him say to the other two as he passed them in the corridor. He'd been waiting for Hiroshi to take him aside and tell him about the party, but it hadn't happened yet.

Emi and her friends were planning to go on a skiing trip. A one-night/two-day bus tour, it dovetailed perfectly with their winter break. He'd overheard the girls discussing it in the break room at work.

They hadn't mentioned it to him yet either. He thought he'd rather go with Emi and her friends: a ski tour was fancier, and better for telling people about later.

His shift over, Yuta lingered in the break room and tried to ease himself into the conversation Emi and her friends were having.

"I just bought the new Mister Children CD. I can make you a copy if you want."

"Really? Thanks."

"And I got Hikaru Utada's album. I can make you a copy of that too."

"Thanks."

The conversation died. Yuta saw the girls giving Emi meaningful looks.

"Okay," Emi said. "Ready to go?"

"What about doing some karaoke?" suggested Yuta.

"Nah. Finals are just around the corner."

They left the hamburger joint and headed for the station. On the way, Yuta kept talking to Emi and the others, but they hardly responded.

"Hey, Emi!" came a male voice from somewhere in front of them. Koji was standing in the square in front of the station, waving his hand in a big sweeping motion. Behind him stood several other boys, all in the same uniform.

"Let's have our meeting upstairs in McDonald's." Koji pretended to push off with imaginary ski poles. Emi flinched.

Ah, so that was what was going on! Yuta finally understood: Emi and her friends were going off skiing with the private-school boys.

"Oh, so Yuta's coming with us on the Christmas ski trip, is he?" asked Koji.

Emi struggled for a reply.

"What's that? You guys going skiing, are you?" Yuta said in a cheery voice. "I'd love to go, but I can't, actually. Got other plans. I've got this party with some girls from the trade school."

Emi and her friends all looked very relieved.

"That figures. Yuta's always got something up his sleeve."

"Well, I'd better be on my way." He waved cheerfully and went off.

A north wind had started blowing, so he wrapped his scarf around his face like a mask.

As soon as he was alone, he whipped out his cell. He called Hiroshi, who quickly picked up the phone.

"Yeah, hello?"

In the background, Yuta could hear people slapping down mahjong tiles.

"Hiroshi, you at mahjong?" Yuta perked up. He asked about Shinpei and Naoya, and found out that they were there too. It sounded great.

"I'll come join you. I just got off work."

"Oh, uh, okay," Hiroshi said after a slight pause. " We can play runner-up-out."

Yuta wondered who else was there.

When he got there, he discovered it was Tetsu from fifth period.

"Yo there," Tetsu said, raising his hand in greeting.

"Who's winning?" asked Yuta, sitting down at the table.

"Tetsu—the bastard!"

"He's killing me."

"He sold his soul to the devil. Of course he's going to win, the bastard."

The three of them heaped abuse on Tetsu. But there was no malice behind it. It was all in fun.

"The winner has the right to choose the order," Tetsu said grandly.

"What do you mean?" asked Yuta, turning to him.

"I mean," said Tetsu, giving a pseudo-orgasmic groan as he piled up the tiles, "the right to pick who pairs up with who at our little get-together with the trade-school girls."

Hiroshi and the others winced.

I get it, thought Yuta. *It's Tetsu, not me, who's been invited.*

"Uh, well, yeah," said Hiroshi, scratching his head. "At the moment it's four on four. But we could get them to bring along someone else if you'd like . . ."

"No. No need." Yuta shook his head. "Christmas Eve, right? I'm going to spend the night up in Naeba—you know, the ski resort—with some girls from work."

"Whoa! What's all this?" Shinpei and Naoya were suddenly all smiles. "Aren't you the sly one! All this time you've had your own supply of pussy on tap, and not a word to us about it." They pretended to kick him.

"Yeah. Sorry about that." Yuta's feigned cheerfulness was pretty convincing.

He looked over at his phone and pretended to check it for messages.

"Doctor, my chest hurts really bad." Yuta had skipped class to go to the hospital.

Yuta explained his symptoms: if he even looked at his cell phone, it became hard to breathe and he would start burping.

"It's making me really nervous. I mean, I get the shakes if my cell phone hasn't rung for an hour, or if I haven't gotten any messages."

"How about throwing the thing away?" suggested Irabu casually.

"I can't do that, no way. How would I get in touch with my friends?"

"You know, even if you couldn't get in touch with people, it wouldn't kill you." Irabu was carefully plucking out a nose hair.

"What are you talking about?" said Yuta, grimacing.

"Well, whatever. Forget it. You want to go with me to a model builders' show in Akihabara? Two people together get a discount."

"What about my afternoon classes?"

"Skip them. I can write you all the medical certificates you want," said Irabu with a chuckle.

Yuta couldn't say no.

They whizzed through the streets in Irabu's fancy Porsche. All the buildings were decorated for Christmas; the whole city looked like it was waiting for something fun to happen.

The exhibition hall was crammed with nerdy types. There are lots of guys like this at school, thought Yuta. They were the kind who usually sat quietly in a corner of the classroom.

Irabu was glued to the model tank booth. His eyes were lit up like a kid's.

"This here's the one I'm planning to build next."

"Oh yeah? Really?" Yuta wasn't sure how to react.

They went to the central open area, where the giveaways were held. Someone was announcing that you could win a free gift if you had the lucky number on your admission ticket. The gift was a special limited-edition model.

The number was announced.

"Hey, that's me!" Irabu said loudly.

"Good for you." Yuta smiled at him. But for some reason, it seemed that two people held tickets with that number. The other was an elementary school boy accompanied by his parents.

Irabu and the little boy climbed up onto the platform together.

The woman who was doing the announcements conferred with her boss in nervous whispers. She bowed to Irabu.

"I'm very sorry, but we've made a mistake and issued two tickets with the same number. We are so sorry to ask you this, but could you possibly relinquish your claim to the prize?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" said Irabu, thrusting out his jaw. "Why should I have to pay for your mistake?"

"We really are awfully sorry. The prize is a limited-edition model, you see, and we only have one of them to give away."

"All the more reason for me not to back down. I want it."

"Um, may I inquire, is it a present for your son?" the woman asked gingerly.

"Nope, it's for me." Irabu replied, unruffled.

The woman looked momentarily pained and then squeezed out a stiff smile. "He's a kid," she said quietly. "I really think you should let him have it."

"Well I won't."

"We'll give you something else instead."

"Out of the question. I want the limited-edition model." Irabu refused to give even an inch.

Yuta finally spoke up, addressing Irabu in a low voice. "Don't you think you should let him have it?"

"No way. If there's only one prize, then we should settle this with a round of Rock Paper Scissors."

"What? Come on! You're supposed to be an adult."

"I may be an adult, but I still say no."

The schoolboy looked up at Irabu nervously. The announcer was completely flustered, but they needed to get on with the giveaway, so they decided to do a round of Rock Paper Scissors.

"Are you sure that you don't mind settling it this way?" The woman looked guilty as she asked the boy and his parents for their consent.

"Ready . . . go!"

Irabu won. He punched the air with his fist and showed his delight with a huge grin.

The boy burst into tears.

People in the crowd looked disgusted.

"Scumbag!"

"Give the poor kid the model!"

Unperturbed, Irabu walked toward Yuta, clutching his prize.

"Look at this! It's sure to become a valuable collector's item."

Yuta thought to himself, *The man simply doesn't care whether other people like him or not. He's like a little kid—he makes no effort to mold himself to what other people want. And that's why he doesn't mind being alone.*

Yuta envied the way Irabu didn't put on any airs. In today's world, that was perhaps the strongest weapon you could have.

It was Christmas Eve. Yuta was alone, walking aimlessly through the streets. He didn't want to go home. If somebody phoned and he answered, everyone would know he had nothing planned for tonight.

He resolved not to answer any calls and set his cell to auto-answer mode. It was the first time he'd ever done that.

He was hungry, but he couldn't very well go into a McDonald's or a Yoshinoya. If he went in by himself, everyone would see that he had no friends. He rubbed his empty belly as he walked under the light of the neon signs.

He was still clutching his phone, out of sheer force of habit. He glanced at it constantly to check for new messages.

It was alerting him. Wondering who might be texting him on Christmas Eve, he checked and saw that it was Irabu.

< I ordered a Christmas cake from the Imperial Hotel. >

Oh God, here we go again! Yuta thought.

< The strawberries are huge! It's great! >

What a loser! If Irabu were a normal guy, he'd be dressing up as Santa Claus and handing out presents to his own kids.

< Mother gave me some Hermes pajamas. >

How had the man ever managed to become a doctor? Yuta wondered. But since he had nothing better to do, he started typing a response.

< About to board the bus with the trade-school girls and head for the ski resort. >

The reply was immediate.

< Send me a photo! >

Fuck it! he thought. *Scientific advances make lying that much harder!*

< Sorry. I lied. >

He decided to tell the truth. What did it matter? Irabu was way older than him, and he wasn't a friend or anything.

< Got nothing to do. Am just walking around, killing time. >

He felt as if he had made a confession: as if a faint breeze was wafting through his heart.

< Got no friends either. They saw thru me. Found out what a pitiful jerk I am. >

The words came pouring out. For some reason he had suddenly become frank about his feelings.

< When I was at junior high I was a totally boring guy and couldn't make any friends. Even dropped out for a while. Since I got into high school, I've tried to change, tried to make friends by being cheerful all the time. Seems to have failed. Can't force it, I guess. >

Yuta felt a sense of relief. The truth was, he was tired of maintaining a phony character and trying to adapt himself to other people day after day.

A reply came from Irabu.

< Got the department store to deliver a whole roast turkey. >

Didn't he even bother to listen to what people were saying?

< It's a genuine Canadian turkey! >

Probably that was why not having friends didn't bother him.

< Looks delicious. Will send pic. >

A few seconds later, a photo arrived. The turkey was sitting on a table—or was it a consulting couch? Must be Irabu's room at the hospital. Mayumi was standing behind the turkey, holding up her fingers in a peace sign for the camera. There were lots of other people in the picture too.

Yuta was desperate to hear the sound of someone else's voice, so he gave Irabu a call.

"It's Christmas Eve, so all the patients—you know how boring it is in the hospital—decided to get together." Irabu was very relaxed as he chatted away. "You want to come have some turkey?"

Mayumi came to the phone. "Come by and see us if you've got time," she said. Her voice sounded as unfriendly as ever.

"Really?"

"If you want an injection, sure!"

"Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Mayumi, do you have a boyfriend?"

"Nope."

"And how do you rate my chances?"

"Pretty dismal. I don't do minors."

Her reply was immediate. But Yuta was feeling good; he didn't give up but kept right on talking.

"What's your ideal boyfriend?"

"Somebody who's got no friends. I'm no good at parties."

"Merry Christmas," whispered Yuta as he gazed up at the night sky. In wintertime, the stars were much brighter and clearer than in summer—like a beautiful woman from the north country who was not afraid to be alone.

Double Check

ONE

When journalist Yoshio Iwamura discovered "obsessive-compulsive checking disorder" listed in a psychology book in the library reading room, he leapt to his feet, thinking, *Yes, that's it!*

Wondering what was going on, the people sitting nearby all turned and stared. Yoshio got control of himself and cleared his throat, blushing furiously.

He took a deep breath and looked down at the entry. It was in the section on "obsessive-compulsive disorders."

> An absurd but persistent notion plants itself in the patient's mind against his own volition. Though he may wish to block it out, the patient is unable to summon up the willpower to do so.

They were talking about him!

> As the need to check and double-check becomes pathological, it finally begins to interfere with the patient's ability to live a normal life in the context of society.

Recently that was true of him too!

Beads of sweat formed on his forehead and his heart started to beat faster. There was no logical reason for it, but learning the official name for his condition increased his sense of hopelessness. He felt like a criminal being sentenced by a judge.

It was about three months ago that he had started worrying about whether he had stubbed out his cigarettes properly. He would leave his apartment (which doubled as his office) and, from nowhere, doubt would raise its ugly head. Did I really and truly stub them out completely? And in the very act of locking the front door, an indescribable feeling of anxiety would well up from somewhere deep inside him.

He would slip back inside and check the ashtrays in his study. Yes, everything was out. But no sooner did he think once more about going out, than the same worries would recur. His desk was covered in a veritable mountain of books and papers. It was unlikely, but what if a spark somehow made a miraculous leap over to the desk? So Yoshio ended up going back into his apartment yet again to check that everything had been put out properly.

This second time he rinsed the ashtrays, moved them out of harm's way and even—to be doubly safe—put them to soak in a sink full of water. It made no difference. As soon as he shut the front door behind him, he was overtaken by fear. Maybe—just maybe—a cigarette that hadn't completely gone out had slipped from the ashtray and was lying concealed beneath all his papers. Perhaps somewhere in that chaotic study of his lay a smoldering spark. The thought was enough to plunge him into a state of utter panic. It took him a very long time to leave the house.

When it had all started, he made a decision to stop smoking thirty minutes before leaving his apartment.

But it was no use. The problem was he knew that cigarettes burned slowly and steadily. If one fell onto a cushion, it might take a good half hour before the thing burst into flame.

That being the case, he made up his mind to straighten up his apartment. It was only because the place was so messy that he had to worry about cigarette butts lurking in obscure corners of the room at all.

But that resolution didn't last long either. An unmarried man of thirty-three is by nature a slob. Any energy he had, he put toward his work. Cleaning and tidying on a daily basis was a physical impossibility for someone who didn't even put his garbage out on the right days.

Every time he left the house, Yoshio would be overwhelmed with doubt about whether his cigarette butts had been fully extinguished. He would dash back in to check five, even six, times. As he contemplated the ashtrays soaking in the sink, he would say to himself, "Is there really any need to worry about *these* bursting into flames?" But no sooner had he stepped out the front door than he would be overcome by a vague feeling of unease.

Last week he had ended up missing a plane.

He had resolved to give up smoking that day, and he had succeeded.

He had crammed all his cigarette butts from the night before into a trash bag—without wetting them first.

Inevitably, his imagination ran riot after he'd left the house. Was there a spark smoldering somewhere in the bag?

Once the thought had occurred to him, a series of catastrophic scenarios played themselves out in his head. He became edgy and unsettled. If this had happened at one of the stations close to his home, he could have stopped back easily enough, but it was in the monorail to the airport that his anxiety reached its crescendo. Of course, once he got back home, his apartment was just a few messy rooms with no one there. Nothing more than that.

So now his compulsion for checking had screwed up his work. Yoshio was alarmed by his own weirdness.

No two ways about it: there was something funny going on here. His behavior was simply not normal.

He tried repeatedly to give up smoking. But it was hopeless. He had smoked two packs a day for fifteen years, and he wasn't going to kick a habit like that easily. Anyway, trying to give up smoking was not addressing the root of the problem. The real underlying problem was his irrational behavior.

It was journalistic habit that prompted Yoshio to start looking into his own condition. At the library, he worked his way through a mountain of medical texts. That was when he came across something called obsessive-compulsive checking disorder. The book said that people who suffer from this disorder have a "habitual and pathological" need to check and recheck.

It looked like there was only one thing to do: go to a hospital and get some treatment.

He had selected the hospital because it was close to his train line. And he liked the building, because it looked so clean and tidy. The big signboard outside said "IRABU GENERAL HOSPITAL." Yoshio reasoned that a general hospital would probably have a neurology section, so he gave it a shot. Sure enough, there was a neurology department, but for some reason it was down in the basement.

He knocked on the door. From within, a cheery voice sang out, "Hello, hello! Come right in!" It was just like the greeting you get when checking into a traditional country inn. Yoshio pushed open the door and went into the consultation room. A pale, fat, middle-aged man smiled broadly and greeted him from an armchair.

"How about trying our luck with a nice little injection for starters, eh?" He spread his hands wide and raised his bulk ever so slightly off the chair.

"Huh?" Yoshio's head jerked back in surprise. He frowned.

"The jokers upstairs aren't sending anybody down to see me these days. Don't think we've given anyone an injection for a good two weeks now." The fat doctor was getting himself worked up. "Those internal medicine fellows are so inconsiderate. I keep telling them to treat all colds and flu as psychosomatic, but—"

Yoshio was flabbergasted. Who was this man? A badge on his white coat said, "ICHIRO IRABU, DOCTOR OF NEUROLOGY."

"Mayumi, love, why don't we go for a deep vein job today? Use the fattest needle in the shed."

In response to his voice, a young and almost unfeasibly sexy nurse emerged from behind a screen. Her manner, though, was wholly without charm. She scratched her neck lazily.

"Isn't this great! I was just thinking that if we didn't get a patient all week, I might have to go and hire myself one of those Iranians who hang around in Ueno Park."

Dr. Irabu went on muttering to himself. Yoshio, meanwhile, had absolutely no idea what was going on. The necessary preparations were swiftly completed, and in no time Yoshio found himself about to be injected in the vein of his left arm. The syringe was a great fat monster, about the size of a flashlight.

Irabu stared intently at the needle as it punctured the skin. His whole face flushed, and his nostrils twitched.

Yoshio could not help exclaiming, "Ow, that hurts!" Predictably enough, the big syringe made for a painful injection.

He glanced at the nurse. She was chewing gum noisily and had a sullen expression on her face. There was a slit in her white skirt, through which her luscious-looking thigh could be seen.

Was this a hospital—or what? Yoshio felt suddenly disoriented.

"You'll need to keep coming here for a while," said Irabu with a grin. "Not to worry. I'll knock something off the consultation fee."

Yoshio was dumbfounded. Irabu—where was the man's neck?—bore a distinct resemblance to a sea lion.

"Compulsive neurosis, I hear. At least, that's what the preliminary examination report I received says."

"Uh, yeah," was all the response he was able to muster.

"Very rare. Someone doing self-diagnosis this way."

"Oh, is that, uh, right?"

"You bet. Normally, the characters who come galloping into neurology are in such a state of panic that one in three's forgotten to put his damn trousers on!"

As he talked, Irabu had bounced up out of his chair. "And a one-two-three. A one-two-three." He was joining in with the exercise program blaring out of the radio in the middle of the room.

"So, you're a reporter?" The flesh under his chin was billowing in great waves. "I suppose that's why you did your own research."

"Yes, I suppose it is. Investigating things is my job, after all."

"You probably know something about how this should be treated too, then? Ow. Ow." He was still doing his workout. Now he was stretching over backward with his hands on his hips.

"Excuse me, Doctor, but couldn't you sit down and concentrate on talking to me?"

"Excellent idea. Sorry, sorry. First injection for a long time. Made me feel rather frisky! Ha-ha-ha."

At long last they sat facing one another. Irabu fanned himself with Yoshio's preliminary report. Was this hospital really legitimate? Yoshio was feeling increasingly unsure, but this was where he'd gone, and there was nothing he could do about it now. He focused and set about giving Irabu a short history of his condition. Interviews and discussions were his stock in trade, so he set up a plot outline and explained his symptoms as straightforwardly as he could, choosing his words with care. He thought he did a rather good job of it.

"That was quite something, Mr. Iwamura," said Irabu admiringly. "It's unusual for people to know exactly what they're doing as they go crazy."

"Go crazy?" He was taken aback. "Doctor, I was hoping to get some counseling."

According to the medical texts he'd looked at, drug-based treatments didn't really work with compulsive disorders. The general method of treatment was to go to a specialist for psychotherapy.

"Counseling, huh?" Irabu said with a sneer. "Waste of time, that sort of thing."

"Waste of time?"

"All that nonsense about 'What was your childhood like?' and 'Let's delve into your character,' right? Well, as far as I'm concerned, your childhood and your character aren't conditions that can be cured, so I'll be damned if I'm going to waste my time asking about them!"

Yoshio was speechless. This was the first time in his life he had visited a psychiatrist. Was this what it was supposed to be like?

"Or is there anything you want to confess?"

"Don't think so."

"Well, that's fine then." Irabu settled back in his armchair and crossed his stumpy legs with considerable difficulty. Yoshio had only been given a stool to sit on. He wondered whether this might be part of his treatment.

"All that happens is you start worrying about things you shouldn't be worrying about. It's a vicious circle." Irabu clasped his hands behind his head and flashed Yoshio a grin.

"So, then, what do you think I should—?"

"Unextinguished cigarette butts, was it? Wouldn't signing up for fire insurance clear up the whole business?"

Yoshio was baffled. "No, I don't really think that would . . ."

"You're not able to give up smoking?"

"That's right."

"Well, how about if you stop using ashtrays altogether, and use a bucket of water instead?"

Yoshio was startled. It was a highly practical method of addressing the problem that bypassed the whole emotional side of things. Yoshio had imagined them having more of a Socratic dialogue on psychological issues.

"Not going home at all is another possibility to consider."

"Huh?" Yoshio did not get what the doctor was driving at.

"Today you successfully managed to leave the house and come here to the hospital, right? Most likely your apartment hasn't caught fire. So if you just continue to stay away from home, you can keep the place safe and sound."

Yoshio didn't really know what to make of that one.

"Every time you leave your home you get anxious. That means you can solve the problem by either not going out in the first place, or not going back once you've left."

Yoshio gave a little groan. Everything was so strange and unexpected that he wasn't able to think straight. "Anyway, Doctor, I think I'll do that thing with the bucket that you suggested."

"You do that. I mean, there's no medicine I can give you that works against compulsive disorders. Suppose you could always hose down your apartment right before you go out! Ha-ha-ha!"

Yoshio did not enjoy being laughed at. This Irabu fellow was a very eccentric character.

"And by the way, Mr. Iwamura, what sort of stories do you write?"

Yoshio cleared his throat briefly. "Well, the keynote of my work is to look at things from the underdog's point of view, very much at a grassroots level. I dig up injustices committed by public bodies or big business, and I do my small part to make the world a better and a fairer place." He couldn't help feeling slightly pleased with himself.

His ability to ferret things out through unstinting hard work had been recognized. He had now gotten to the point where magazines printed his articles with his byline. It was only a matter of time before someone approached him about doing a book. He was particularly proud of not being a hack who wrote just for the money. Too many journalists his age wrote any old commercial crap that their editors told them to. But he was a real journalist.

"This should be just up your alley, then. There's an estate agent who's buying up all the one-room apartment blocks around here. He's turning them into dorms for massage parlor staff. Don't object to the girls myself, but the men are awful louts. Stick it to 'em! 'The pen's mightier than the sword' and all that sort of thing!"

"Local squabbles like that are not really in my line . . . ," declared Yoshio solemnly.

"All right then. How about laying into the hospital over there on the other side of the railway line? I can give you some top-notch professional malpractice stories."

"What, things like inflating bills when claiming back insurance?"

"Oh, no. I mean, we do that here too. But over there they recruit nurses by offering them free trips to Hawaii and then don't even send them as far as Tokyo Disneyland."

Yoshio looked hard at Irabu. There was no sign he was joking.

"Drop by tomorrow, all right?" said Irabu.

"Okay." The word popped out of Yoshio's mouth before he'd had time to think.

What did it matter, anyway? The books he had consulted all said there was no way to treat his condition with drugs. Considering that a big hospital would keep him waiting a good two hours, the fact that this place was not very crowded was a plus.

As Yoshio left, he called his home phone from his cell. This was a habit he'd gotten into recently. Sometimes he'd call as often as five times a day.

The answering machine switched on. So the telephone was alive and well. *That tells me*, Yoshio thought, *that the place hasn't burned to the ground*.

Originally the answering machine had reassured him, but somewhere along the line it had occurred to him that the apartment could have been partly destroyed by fire, with only the phone having miraculously survived. He was thus only able to confirm that his place had not been totally obliterated by fire.

His mind's eye was quick to conjure up the scene: a lonely telephone ringing in a semi-incinerated room. He was terribly agitated. In his head, he knew how ridiculous the whole thing was, but that did not make the anxiety go away.

Yoshio was having a meeting with an editor in the station building. He had been commissioned to do a series of profiles for a magazine with a fairly young readership. For Yoshio, it represented a good opportunity to widen his network of contacts.

"Mr. Iwamura, I can't help feeling that your selection of people is a little too pedestrian," said the editor, as he looked over Yoshio's proposal for the "Young and Charismatic" series. Kinoshita was five years his junior.

"I don't feel that way. This one here is a young up-and-coming human rights lawyer. This one's a singer who overcame a physical handicap and who's just released a CD."

"Okay, he's a singer—but he sings the most dismal folk songs, doesn't he? When I came up with this whole 'charisma' concept, I was thinking of, you know, DJs in Shibuya, young dotcom entrepreneurs. I wanted, basically, to profile people who are flashier, trendier."

"Every magazine under the sun is running pieces on people like that. I want to show your readers—teenagers, people in their twenties—that some people out there are doing something really worthwhile with their lives."

Kinoshita gave a noncommittal grunt, crossed his arms, and sank into thought. "Okay then, let me speak to the other editors."

"I'll need two days for research. You'll cover my expenses, right?"

"What! You can't be serious! This is a one-page article. Just chat with them for a couple of hours, take a photo or two, and you're done."

"Yeah, but, that's not the way I work," Yoshio said.

Kinoshita ran his hands through his dyed hair, pursed his lips, and muttered, "Yes, I see, I get it." What else could one expect from the editor of a magazine for shallow youngsters?

When working with someone new, the first move was always crucial. It was important for Yoshio to make it clear that he was not one of those writers who let themselves be bossed around.

On his way home, he stopped at a hardware store and bought a couple of buckets. Back at his flat, he half-filled them with water. He put one in his sitting-room-cum-study, and the other in his bedroom.

He smoked one cigarette for test purposes. When he dropped the smoked-out cigarette into the bucket under the desk, there was a fizz and it went out.

This looked like it might just work. The chance of a fire breaking out had now been reduced to zero. He tidied up his books and papers for a while. Then he decided to go out for a late lunch. He glanced down at the inside of the bucket. The cigarette paper had unfurled and the cigarette had disintegrated. A few sorry shreds of tobacco floated in the tar-stained water.

Yoshio was starting to worry.

Certainly, no fire was going to break out from the bucket. But what about when he knocked some ash off his cigarette? It was entirely possible that a spark could fly off and land somewhere nearby.

Yoshio carefully examined all the magazines and papers that lay scattered on the floor near the bucket. There must be a burn mark somewhere. He felt increasingly nervous.

At the same time, he told himself that he was being ridiculous. Even if a spark had flown off, it was hardly going to cause a fire.

Yoshio forced himself to leave the apartment. He shut the door and took a deep breath. As he slid the key into the keyhole, he unconsciously held his breath.

Just once, he thought to himself, I'll go in just once, to make sure. So he went back inside and had a good look on top of and under the desk.

Not a good idea. He left the apartment, and then went back in once more. He repeated the whole process several more times. In the end, he abandoned his plan to go out.

He decided to get a pizza delivered. He was up to three pizzas a week at the moment.

Yoshio sighed deeply. He wondered whether to hire someone to keep an eye on the apartment when he went out. Being married, of course, would be the best solution. He seriously—seriously—considered giving up smoking. After all, if he didn't stop, he'd eventually become unable to go out at all.

TWO

"So how did you manage to get out of your apartment today?" inquired Irabu, fingering the folds of flesh under his chin. He was sitting cross-legged on his armchair and looked like some old holy man.

"On days that I know I'll be going out, I don't smoke at all," Yoshio moaned. Irabu might be a queer fish, but Yoshio was grateful to have someone to talk things over with. The injections were painful, but Yoshio's need for a sympathetic audience was stronger.

"But it's really hard to leave anyway. I get nervous that cigarette butts from the night before might be lying around somewhere, out of sight."

"Hm. Well, let me make one thing clear right now: I don't do house calls."

"I'm not asking you to. But I suppose, Doctor, that the first thing I should do is give up smoking?"

"Uh-uh." Irabu shook his head brusquely. "Smoking is just a manifestation of your anxiety. If you gave it up, you'd just shift your concern over to the main gas shutoff valve. Then you'd develop a new complex about that instead."

"The main gas shutoff valve?"

Why had Irabu gone and said that? He got a strange feeling—an itch, or a pain, he wasn't sure which it was—in his pubic bone. The main gas shutoff valve. He hadn't turned it off. Matter of fact, all the time he'd been living in the apartment, he'd never once turned off even the gas valves connected to the cooking range. The thought had never occurred to him.

He had moved into this apartment three years ago. He had never checked the gas fittings. There was a very real possibility that the rubber fittings had hardened and developed cracks.

"Please, Doctor, don't say things like that," Yoshio said in a pitiful tone. "Now you've made me start worrying about gas valves."

"I'm sure I asked you on your last visit, but have you got fire insurance?"

"I think the landlord has it. When I signed the rental contract, I was only asked to get insurance for my furniture and things."

"Okay, well, that's fine. No need to worry about that then."

"That's not the point. If I do start a fire, it will cause all sorts of damage to other people."

"Sure, but that cuts both ways. Fires aren't going to disappear off the face of the earth."

What sort of logic was that? Yoshio felt slightly lightheaded.

"I think that'll do me for today. I have to be going."

"So soon? But you just got here. At least have a cup of coffee. Hey, Mayumi." The nurse glanced over from the far corner of the room with an expression that said she'd rather be doing anything else.

"You'd be better off hurrying home to check for gas leaks," she said off-handedly.

What kind of nurse was she? Aggravating his phobias.

He couldn't sit still, so he got to his feet.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Iwamura." Irabu would not let him go. "That other hospital across the way. I hear that they're also inflating the number of beds they have. To tell the truth, we do the same thing here—but over there they've upped the actual figure by twenty percent! It's outrageous. Go on, name and shame them."

"Out of the question." Shrugging off Irabu's hand, Yoshio made for the door.

"I'll pay you a million yen if you write an exposé about them."

Yoshio couldn't deal with Irabu anymore. When he got to the road in front of the hospital, he caught a taxi and hurried back home.

In his mind's eye, he had a clear image of the gas hissing as it seeped out from cracked rubber tubes. His knees trembled slightly.

Why did his imagination have to be so damn vivid? Yoshio wanted to burst into tears.

Through the taxi window he could see the sky above the part of town where he lived. No telltale cloud of smoke in the sky.

And, sure enough, once he got home, it was the same gloomy, empty, messy room it always was. He suddenly felt overwhelmed by fatigue.

Yoshio opened the window to let in some fresh air. From his balcony on the fourth floor, he looked out over the city, and heaved a sigh.

This was not good. Every time he went out, he started to panic.

His eyes fell on the little cigarette kiosk across the road. He always bought his cigarettes by the carton there. An old lady about his mother's age ran the place.

Yoshio left the apartment and went over. "Hello," he said in a voice a little quieter than usual.

"Hello there, dear," smiled the old lady. He had never had a conversation with her before, but she seemed to recognize him.

"Ah, actually, I was wondering if could possibly ask you a favor," Yoshio said hesitantly. "Could you, do you think, tell me the phone number here?"

"I beg your pardon?" The old lady was frowning dubiously.

"I was thinking that I could call you from wherever it is that I've gone out to. And then, if you wouldn't mind, you could tell me," and he turned around and pointed toward his building with a jerk of his chin, "if that apartment building is on fire?"

The old lady did not say anything. She looked hard at Yoshio for a while. Then she pulled her chair away from the window.

"Look, ah, let me just explain what this is all about." Realizing that the conversation was not going well, Yoshio turned a sickly smile on her. "I get awfully worried about whether I've put out my cigarettes properly; whether I've turned off the gas—"

The old lady had turned away and was craning her neck to the back of the shop. "Sayoko, can you come out here a minute?"

"I'd really appreciate it if you would just listen to what I have to say." He was sweating like the proverbial pig.

A woman in her thirties emerged from the back of the shop. "What is it, Mom? Anything wrong?"

"I've got a weirdo here."

The two women eyed him suspiciously. The younger one very cautiously drew down the partition window. Yoshio saw himself reflected in the glass.

He couldn't bear it anymore, and walked off. As he went up in the elevator of his building, he returned to his normal self. His cheeks burned.

What the hell had he gone and said? It was unbelievable. Was he insane? People in the neighborhood were going to start talking about him. That was certain.

He clutched his head in his hands. Now he understood something about the process of going insane.

He managed to bring Kinoshita, the editor, around to his way of thinking, and his choice of people to be profiled was approved. The subject of the first article was a homeless poet.

"A homeless poet? Let's hope he doesn't smell too bad." Kinoshita, dressed in a stylish Italian shirt, grimaced in distaste.

"So tell me, then, what kind of jobs would you rather be doing?"

"Me? Good ones, of course. Writing about overseas resorts, profiling new products, that sort of thing. If you're in charge of the entertainment listings page, of course, you can see *all* the films and get *all* the free sample CDs you want. Ooh, it's wicked!"

Kinoshita was busily patting down the hair on the sides of his head. As the older and wiser of the two men, Yoshio decided to give him the benefit of his opinion.

"You know, you need to acquire some deeper ideals. Hustling for freebies debases a man. A truly grown-up person is someone who is of use to society."

"Oh, Iwamura, will you stop it! Sermonizing like some pompous old professor. Haven't you got a girlfriend?"

"Stop trying to change the subject." Without exception, magazine editors were a frivolous, self-centered lot.

Yoshio did the interview in Yoyogi Park. The homeless man was still in his early thirties. Using a calligraphy brush, he would jot down poems he'd composed onto postcards, and sell them to high school girls outside Harajuku Station for one hundred yen each.

Looking at you,
I think how easy it is
To be misunderstood
By the world.

"Iwamura," hissed Kinoshita, "the fellow's a fraud."

"What right have you to say that? He's obviously popular with teenagers in a sort of underground way."

"All that means is that he's good at fooling kids."

"Oh, stop that. Cynicism is one thing I just can't stand."

Yoshio got Kinoshita to shut up, and he started the interview. For a homeless man, the poet was quite neat and tidy. His hair and beard had been properly cut and styled.

"Well, you see, when I decided to become 'homeless,' I had a conscious motive for doing it. What I wanted to do was, you know, to express my opposition to our present capitalist society," said the poet, a half-smile playing about his lips. "Basically, I don't want to be part of society in its current form. People should live like people—with humanity."

The message reverberated with Yoshio. There was nothing sordid or debased about this man; in fact he seemed to be proud of having discovered his own kind of freedom.

"And that, pretty much, is what I want teenagers to, you know, realize as well. There's a lot more to life than just going to university and getting a nine-to-five job. Basically what I'm saying is, Hey, it's all right not to join the rat race."

Kinoshita tugged at his sleeve and pulled Yoshio aside to talk.

"This isn't very polite toward our interviewee, you know." Yoshio glared at him.

"Fuck politeness! This is the twenty-first century!" Kinoshita's eyes were bulging out of his head in fury. "This half-assed philosophy is the stalest load of clichés I ever heard in my life."

"But it's fresh and new to the youth of today. His popularity proves that."

"No. It just goes to show that there are fools in any age!"

"Why are you such a cynic?"

"Do you seriously intend to write this joker up?"

"Sure I do."

"You're too damn serious for your own good."

The interview took two hours. The man was verbose. In the end he was talking about how he wanted to publish a collection of his poetry.

Kinoshita sat behind Yoshio, sulking. He was blowing cigarette smoke into the air. His body language was clear: *This whole thing's got nothing to do with me.*

Yoshio started paying daily visits to Irabu General Hospital. He did go take a look at the neurology department of another hospital to see what it was like. There were so many patients that they couldn't all fit into the waiting room, and they spilled out into the hall. Not likely to get a proper consultation there.

"Oh, come on, Mr. Iwamura. Do something about that other hospital for me. *Please*."

Iwamura felt he needed to have a serious talk with someone today—even if that someone had to be Irabu.

"More importantly, Doctor, thanks to you, I've now started worrying about the gas, in addition to cigarettes," protested Yoshio. "What are you going to do about that?"

He had bought some rubber tubing at a home improvement store and used it to replace the old fittings. But his fear had not lessened.

"Well, remember, you're not the only one who might start a fire. Your neighbors might too."

"That doesn't really help me."

"Okay then, what about today? How did you manage to get out?"

"Well, I couldn't see any other way, so when I left home today, I decided to turn off the gas at the outside meter. That stops the gas from getting into the house altogether."

And that was what Yoshio had indeed gone and done. It was a pain in the butt, but he knew that if he didn't do it, he'd be so worried about gas leaks he wouldn't be able to go out at all.

"Heh! You're a shrewd operator!" Irabu was full of admiration. "Attacking the cause of your anxiety at its root that way, who knows, you might surprise us all and get better."

Yoshio's head snapped up.

"Provided you always make the first move, Mr. Iwamura, you can keep your fear under wraps. Yes, if you can manage it, I'm sure things will start moving in a positive direction."

It was the first time Irabu had ever said anything encouraging to him. Hot tears welled up into Yoshio's eyes.

"But, of course, once you've dealt with the gas, you've got to think about the electricity too."

"Huh?" Yoshio said.

"Oh yes. I've heard that more fires are caused by faulty electricity than by gas leaks. Then there are the multiple socket extension cords and the cathode-ray tubes in television sets that can just burst into flame. Spontaneous combustion, you know."

Oh my God! What was the man saying! An image of his room appeared in his mind's eye. It was packed with plugged-in electronic equipment, all surrounded by a veritable mountain of books and papers. In his vision, the equipment suddenly burst into flame, and the fire spread rapidly. The blood slowly drained from Yoshio's face. His fingertips trembled slightly.

He would have to do something about his multi-socket extension cords as soon as he got home. Most of them were concentrated around the desk with his PC on it. He made up his mind to put the standard lamp and the radio-cassette player away in the closet. But what could he do to stop the cathode-ray tube from spontaneously combusting?

"The multi-sockets should be okay. But is it really my responsibility if the TV suddenly bursts into flame?"

"You're better off arguing that one with the manufacturer—in court."

Yoshio felt faint. Cases like that were a godsend to him as a reporter. But he knew that taking on a big company in the courts was nerve-racking and more or less doomed to failure.

Was it time to ditch the TV, then?

No, that would be stupid. Every household in the country had a TV. It wouldn't be fair if he were the only person worrying about it.

"Aren't you worried about your television at home, Doctor?" inquired Yoshio.

"No, I've got an LCD. No cathode-ray tube in there." When he grinned, his pink gums were exposed. "Latest model. Hangs on the wall. Cost me one-and-a-half million. Ha-ha-ha."

Yoshio slumped on his chair. Maybe he should take this opportunity to get a new one. After all, his TV was ten years old.

But that still left the problem of how he was going to deal with the possibility of faulty electricity. If he switched off the electricity at the breaker every time he went out, the answering machine and the fax would stop working and all the food in the fridge would go bad.

"When a building is over twenty years old, the wiring in the wall starts deteriorating," added Irabu. "Sometimes rats will even gnaw at it."

"Doctor, are you going out of your way to scare me?" Yoshio's bottom had started to itch.

"Sorry. Terribly sorry." He laughed uproariously. "How about a cup of coffee? Mayumi!"

The nurse, who was sitting in a corner, pulled up her dress and scratched at her thigh noisily.

"Wouldn't you be better off going home," she said carelessly, "to check the electricity?" Her gaze drifted over to the window.

She's right, Yoshio thought, *I should get home right away*. He decided that after checking everything, he'd buy himself a little LCD television. And if the fridge was going to be unusable, he'd also need a picnic cooler.

"I must go." His voice faltered ever so slightly.

"What, leaving already? Let me tell you something about that other hospital first. They don't cure their patients; they just turn them into drug-addicts. Of course, we do more or less the same thing here, but . . ."

Yoshio didn't want to get involved. He left in a hurry, leapt into a taxi, and headed off home. He looked at the sky above the part of town where he lived. This was becoming his daily routine.

As he looked up at the blue spring sky, he felt more and more depressed. How was this going to end?

THREE

After brooding for a while, he decided to turn off the gas at the meter and the electricity at the breaker every time he went out.

He would use the fridge for drinks only, and he'd stop buying fresh produce altogether.

He reorganized the electronic devices in his study. He abandoned his standard desk lamp, switching instead to a builder's helmet with a fitted flashlight. He couldn't let anyone see him working in this bizarre getup.

"Why's your answering machine stopped working?" Kinoshita asked him.

"I'll just be using my cell. Call me on that."

"But I can't send you faxes when you're out. That's inconvenient."

"Don't worry, you can send them by snail mail."

"You've got to be kidding!" said Kinoshita petulantly.

Yoshio was aware that people must think he was a bit of an oddball.

Once he was in the middle of a meeting when he heard the siren of a fire engine. He was a good five miles from his apartment at the time, but he thought to himself it could be—it could very well be—his place. He turned pale, made some excuse, and hurried home.

When the person he had been meeting with saw his reaction to the siren, he was convinced that Yoshio's mother or father must be at death's door. When Yoshio later explained the situation, the man shrank back slightly and gave a thin smile.

Yoshio also did actually call the cigarette kiosk opposite his building. He had a job that would take him out of town. He finally left the house after two hours of checking and double-checking everything, but as he stood on the platform at Tokyo Station he was overwhelmed with dread. He imagined different scenes—electricity sparking, gas leaking from the valves—and his knees started shaking.

He didn't have the courage to board the bullet train in this state. If he got on the train, he knew that he'd spend the entire trip thinking about his apartment. But if he just turned around and went home, he would cause trouble for a lot of other people.

Yoshio got the telephone number of the cigarette shop from directory assistance. Without giving it a second thought, he called the place from his cell phone. The old lady answered.

"I'm sorry to bother you. Can you see any smoke coming from the fourth floor of the apartment building right across the street?"

Based on their previous encounter, she presumably figured it was him.

"Just tell me. Is it or isn't it on fire?"

Finally the old lady replied, "No, it's not on fire." She sounded frightened, probably in response to the desperation she'd heard in his voice. Somehow or other Yoshio managed to make the trip. But now he was embarrassed even to walk along the street in front of his building.

He wore a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes, and would break into a funny little skipping run when he passed the cigarette shop, pretending not to notice the place.

What the hell am I doing? Is this really me? Yoshio had trouble believing the situation he was in.

From childhood he had always been a ball of energy. He had been class representative and director of the student association. He was always at the center of any group, and he had a knack for making people laugh. Now look at him! Scared stiff at the thought of nonexistent fires, he couldn't even leave the house when he wanted to.

He put on several pounds. He had stopped cooking at home and subsisted on pizzas and takeout. His television was now a portable LCD.

When he charged his cell phone, he would sit and watch it until the red light went out.

It was at this time that his old landlady who lived up on the top floor of the building asked him to do her a favor. The fluorescent light in the corridor on the fourth floor where Yoshio lived had died and she wanted him to change it. She was a widow and she lived all alone in Tokyo. Even changing a simple fluorescent light was not easy for her to do.

It was no problem at all for Yoshio. Cheerfully agreeing to do the job, he climbed up on a chair and replaced the bulb.

"Thank you so much," said the old lady with a courteous bow, before going back upstairs. Yoshio felt invigorated after performing his act of kindness.

But when night fell, and he looked absentmindedly up at the fluorescent light, he became uneasy.

This building was old. They probably repaired things in the individual flats every time the tenants changed, but there was every possibility they skimped on the maintenance of the common areas. Naturally, that would mean that the wiring had not been changed since the block had been built.

Oh no! Oh no! Yoshio frantically tried to change his train of thought. The corridor wasn't his territory. It was none of his business, really.

He imagined the old lady's friendly face in front of him. He imagined himself slapping it hard, over and over.

Faulty wiring!

He groaned to himself. His face was covered in sweat.

Fire!

His face was flushed and hot, but his spine was ice-cold.

He tried desperately to talk himself out of his fears. The corridor was concrete. It shouldn't be able to catch fire easily at all.

But, wait a minute! The apartment next to the light he'd replaced—they were always putting cardboard boxes out into the corridor. Empty mineral water boxes, that's what they were. If anything was going to catch fire, it was those boxes.

Yoshio went out into the corridor and rang the doorbell of that apartment. "Ye—es," answered a woman's voice. It was a young woman with dyed blonde hair who came to the door.

"Uh, hullo, I'm from the apartment over there in the corner. I was wondering if you couldn't possibly stop putting your boxes out in the corridor."

"I beg your pardon?" The woman looked puzzled.

"I'd like you to keep the boxes inside, if you don't mind," Yoshio said with a straight face. The woman, realizing that he had come to complain, started to look annoyed.

"This is home-delivery mineral water. The deliveryman drops it off and picks up the empties when I'm away during the day. That's the system, and there's nothing I can do about it."

"Leaving things in the corridor like that is probably a violation of the fire code."

"But what harm is it doing to you?" Her face was bright red. "The boxes aren't big, and anyway, the landlady hasn't said anything."

"I'm just saying if there *was* a fire. Those boxes are flammable."

"Huh? What's wrong with you? Are you out of your mind? Who says there's going to be a fire right here anyway?"

"It's that fluorescent light." Yoshio pointed up at the light on the ceiling. "The old wiring up there might very well cause a fire."

"I'll call the police on you, I will!" The woman spat out the words with venom before slamming the door in his face.

Yoshio put his hands on his hips and let out a sigh. What should he do? He went back to his apartment, and got dinner out of the way by eating a readymade meal from the convenience store. He lay on his bed and tried to read a book for work. But he was so worried about the hallway that he couldn't take anything in.

He kept running over to the front door and looking out into the hall through the peephole.

There was no sign of a problem with the electricity right now.

But you never know what might happen in the future. He had installed the bulb himself. He bore a share of the responsibility.

Yoshio made up his mind. Pushing a chair over to the door, he used a couple of phone books to get it at just the right height before he sat down to keep an eye on the corridor. Once in a great while, he glanced down at his book.

It was not too comfortable, but what could he do? He couldn't stay calm for a second otherwise.

He ended up observing the other residents in great detail as they came home. Two doors down from him—he hadn't known this—was a gay couple. They were fondling one another out in the corridor.

Yoshio was envious of the other residents and their carefree lives. He had been just like them until a few months ago. Where had it all gone wrong?

As the hour grew later, he wrapped himself in a blanket. He was exhausted, but he ended up keeping lookout over the corridor until the next morning.

The old landlady—obviously an early riser—came down at 6 A.M. She was making the rounds turning off all the lights.

At last Yoshio could go to sleep.

He was a mess. His back was killing him. *Next time I go to the hospital*, he thought, *I'll get Irabu to give me a vitamin injection*.

"Well, shall we give you a double dose, then?" Irabu's eyes glistened as he proposed giving Yoshio two injections with the giant syringe—one in the arm and the other in the hip. "You know what?" he said, unable to keep the jauntiness out of his voice. "I'll throw one of them in for free."

Yoshio told Irabu about the way he had spent the previous night. He told the doctor he was worried he might wind up doing the same thing tonight.

"Yes, but I was thinking that if you are going to worry about fires, ultimately you're going have to start worrying about arson." Today Irabu was sitting like a woman, with his legs tucked sideways beneath him.

"What do you mean?"

"Because, my dear Iwamura, the most common cause of fires is not improperly extinguished cigarette butts or faulty electrical wiring. It's arson. Seems to me that you'll have to start patrolling around your apartment building all night."

"Arson doesn't really bother me."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Because I have no personal responsibility in the matter."

Irabu grunted, puckered his lips, and scratched his neck with a dry rasping sound. "I think, Mr. Iwamura, that you have a complex about anything for which you feel responsible, even in the tiniest degree. It's an 'in for a penny, in for a pound' sort of thing."

Hearing Irabu's explanation, Yoshio had the feeling that he had understood the true nature of his illness. If he had seen somebody else replacing the fluorescent light out in the corridor, he wouldn't have felt a shred of worry. But the fact that he had done the job himself made it his problem.

"I just had a brainwave," Irabu said, slapping his knee. "You should become janitor of your building."

"Eh?"

"I think you'd be fabulous at it. I mean, look how much you worry about fires."

"No way," scowled Yoshio. "I'd have to worry about all the other tenants too." His great dream was to be a successful investigative reporter. Right now, he was going nowhere—and he wasn't too happy about it.

"Maybe the time has come for us to get down to some serious treatment," said Irabu. He got up from his armchair and started doing hip rotations. "Sort of 'action therapy,' you know."

Yoshio looked up. Treatment? He felt a ray of hope. Did that mean his condition was treatable after all?

"Follow me!" Irabu said, striding from the room. Yoshio did as he was told. On the way out, he met the nurse's eye. She turned away with complete and utter unconcern.

They left the hospital and walked along the street. Where were they going? Yoshio was dubious, but tagged along nonetheless. Irabu was humming. From behind, he looked like an oversized cuddly toy. Yoshio caught himself looking for the zipper down his back.

They crossed the train tracks and before long came to a high cinderblock wall. A few cherry trees stood on the far side. There was a fresh smell of greenery: soon the buds would start to appear.

Yoshio looked up at the building. At a glance he could see it was a hospital: nurses were going to and fro along the corridors.

"The courtyard where the doctors and staff take their breaks is just on the other side of this wall," Irabu explained.

Uh-oh! thought Yoshio.

"There's gravel under the bush there. Find yourself a nice big stone."

Irabu bent down and started looking for one. *He can't be serious*, thought Yoshio. But he started looking too.

"So, shall we chuck 'em over? What do you say?"

"Just hang on a minute." Yoshio's eyes were popping out of their sockets. "What if we hit someone?"

"We're more likely not to."

"Oh, come on!"

"Think about it: there's a lot more space on the Earth with nobody in it than space with somebody in it. Chuck a stone with your eyes shut, and chances are you won't hit anybody."

"What sort of argument is that? We're right smack in the middle of Tokyo here, for God's sake. And you just told me that the other side of the wall is the rest area for the hospital staff."

"You've definitely got a compulsive disorder, Mr. Iwamura. That's why you worry about electrical wiring."

"But this is different!"

"No, it's not. It's the same." Irabu gave him a gleaming smile. "Okay. Here we go." And he launched his stone into the air without a trace of hesitation.

A stone about the size of a ping-pong ball described an elegant parabola across the blue sky. There was a thud as it hit the ground, but no human reaction.

"See? It's easy," Irabu said with a laugh. "But that was a bit dull, really. Last time I had someone yelling, 'What the fuck was that!'"

"So, am I supposed to do it too?" Yoshio asked uneasily.

"Yes, it's part of your treatment."

"Really?"

Racked with doubt, Yoshio picked up a stone. With Irabu, he often had the sense that he was being manipulated somehow.

He took aim at the cherry trees and timidly threw his stone.

"Hopeless. Useless," announced Irabu, shaking his head portentously. "You're holding back. You've got to throw it like you mean it. After all, this hospital is corrupt! Rotten!"

"You don't think we might be getting a bit sidetracked here?"

"Absolutely not. No siree." Irabu gave a high-pitched laugh.

Yoshio picked up a second stone and swallowed hard. In his mind's eye he pictured the stone he had thrown smashing into the forehead of a beautiful woman doctor. The blood drained from his cheeks.

"Doctor, I don't think I can do this. What would happen if I hit someone?"

"Don't think about the ifs, shoulds, or woulds!"

"But it's only human to think."

"Chicken. Watch me."

Irabu threw another stone. It hit the wall of the hospital this time. Yoshio looked around nervously. His heart was pounding. Maybe someone had seen them?

Irabu, meanwhile, quite oblivious, was hunting for another stone.

I may be weird, thought Yoshio, *but this Irabu is a hell of a lot weirder.*

It occurred to him that the world was made up of two kinds of people: those who make other people worry, and those who do the worrying themselves. Irabu was the former type, and he the latter. It was because the worriers did the worrymakers' share of worrying that the cosmic balance was maintained and the world could go on in peace. But it wasn't fair! Everyone should have an equal share of worry!

Yoshio tensed his stomach muscles and got ready to throw.

"Now you're up for it, are you? I'll throw one along with you, then. That way we don't know which stone's which."

Huh? What was that all about?

Yoshio threw his stone as high as he could. Both stones disappeared into the hospital grounds.

They heard the sound of breaking glass. It was loud: obviously some sort of thick windowpane. Irabu started to run. He may have been bulky, but he was fast.

"Doctor, wait!" Yoshio charged off after him.

"That was your stone, Mr. Iwamura," Irabu said, his chinflab swinging from side to side.

"There's no way to know that." Yoshio was out of breath. It had been years since he had run at full speed like this.

"Let's do it with Molotov cocktails next time."

"Are you crazy?"

"Treatment, my boy, treatment. Ha-ha-ha."

Yoshio couldn't think of a suitable response.

If everybody was like Irabu, he thought, then the world's whole stock of anxiety would evaporate like mist. The bastard! It wasn't fair for him to hog the available store of cheerfulness this way.

But had anybody seen what they had done just now? Yoshio felt a sharp stab of pain in his chest. Why did fate have it in for him? He kept on running down the street as fast as his legs would carry him.

FOUR

Yoshio's obsessive-compulsive checking disorder started to widen in scope.

He would find himself fretting about what happened to anything he came in contact with.

When he went with his friends to a Korean barbecue place for dinner, it was he who suggested turning off the grill and switched off the gas. But then he started worrying: What if he hadn't fully shut off the gas, and it was still seeping out? He went back in the middle of the night and started pounding on the metal shutter of the restaurant. Someone called the police on him.

It wasn't just fire either. Outside the local train station, he picked up any bicycles that had fallen over. Was that one set properly on its stand? If they all fell over like so many dominoes, somebody might get hurt. The thought would eat away at him while he was on the train and he would abandon everything to go back and check.

A woman friend was driving him in her car when she got a flat. She asked him to change the tire. He refused pointblank. He knew that afterward he'd be tormented with doubt: had he really done the bolts tight enough?

His friend looked at him in disbelief. *No sane woman will ever want to marry me*, thought Yoshio. He was overcome with pessimism about the general direction of his life.

He wasn't interested in becoming a janitor, as Irabu had suggested, but he did wonder about getting a job looking out for suspicious vessels in the East China Sea. After all, keeping a good lookout was his specialty.

He was already depressed enough when something happened to make things even worse.

They discovered that the homeless poet had molested a number of high school girls. Apparently he had won their trust by showing them the magazine with Yoshio's article in it. Instead of going to the police, the girls had complained to the publisher.

"I told you so, didn't I? I told you he was a fraud. You're such a sucker for that kind of antiestablishment claptrap," Kinoshita said.

Yoshio didn't even try to defend himself. He was more concerned about coming up with a strategy. The man had to be arrested before he could do any more harm.

"Who cares? Forget about it." Kinoshita was willing to be broad-minded. "Call it molestation if you like, but all he did was cop a feel. Girl shrieks, and off he runs. The guy's small fry, a loser. As for the girls—maybe someone put them up to it—but they're doing their best to blackmail us. You know, 'How are you gonna make this up to us?' All we need to do is send them some makeup samples that we 'borrow' from one of the women's magazines, and then they'll pipe down."

"But the man's a sex predator—a repeat offender!"

"Ah, there you go again, Mr. Iwamura. Such a worrywart."

"I put him in the magazine. The responsibility is mine."

"No, it's not. Maybe if we'd gone to town on him in some big feature. But this was just a single page. Even if he killed somebody, it's still got nothing to do with us."

Killed somebody? Why did Kinoshita have to say such things? Gloom settled over Yoshio's heart. The poet was timid, and timid people are quick to panic. If one of the girls screamed, he'd probably strangle her, out of fear that someone might hear.

Yoshio clasped his head in his hands. Surely his responsibility didn't extend that far?

He consulted Irabu.

"He could drop a nuclear bomb," laughed the doctor. "It would still have nothing to do with you."

Yoshio was relieved. Lately, visiting the hospital had become the source of his emotional comfort. Leaving the apartment still took him two hours, but he felt astonishingly relaxed when he finally got to the doctor's office. Maybe it was like "animal healing"—the calm that comes from gazing at camels or water buffalo at the zoo.

"Why don't we nab the poet ourselves and get *him* to lob a Molotov cocktail at that hospital?"

Irabu remained a mystery to Yoshio. He suddenly announced they would be doing some more "action therapy" today.

"No, Doctor. I will not do anything like what we did last time."

"Don't worry. This time we'll focus on the hospital director."

"Huh?"

"He's a total crook. He gets kickbacks from all the drug companies—and he badmouths our hospital to anyone who'll listen."

"But he might go to the police about this."

"No worries on that score," said Irabu, showing his teeth in a grin as he jiggled his belly with both hands. "He's got way too much to hide. No chance he'll go running off to the police."

"So," inquired Yoshio timidly, "what is it we're going to do?"

"We're going to loosen the bolts on the wheel of his Mercedes."

Yoshio refused outright. "I will not be a party to that," he said. "God only knows what would happen if a wheel comes off while he's driving."

"I suppose he'd crash," said Irabu nonchalantly.

"But what if someone gets killed?" The spit flew as Yoshio made his plea. "What would you do if someone unconnected—a third party—got hurt?"

"Those are just the risks we've got to take: the wheel coming off; him crashing; somebody getting killed."

"But what's the point?" wailed Yoshio.

"Training for positive thinking," Irabu replied in an oily, mock-guru voice.

"That's not true. You're just using me to get back at that hospital."

"Hey, you've seen right through me!" Irabu broke into a grin.

"It's not too hard."

Yoshio felt completely exhausted. If he wanted treatment, he should look through a medical text. Irabu was someone to talk to—nothing more.

More pressing was that homeless fellow. They couldn't just leave him at large.

Yoshio made his way to Yoyogi Park. He went up to speak to several homeless people, but they all said the same thing: "Haven't seen him around lately." Perhaps he wasn't in Harajuku anymore.

There was nothing else for it. Yoshio went all the way to Shinjuku and Shibuya to look for him. He had formed a mental picture of the poet molesting schoolgirls after showing them the magazine article he had written—and the image wouldn't go away.

"Are you out of your mind?" Kinoshita had exploded at him. "Jesus, next you'll be saying that it's your fault that the mailboxes around town are painted red."

Yoshio decided to let Kinoshita pick the people they would interview from now on. He felt that if he chose them, he would have to do complete background checks.

The homeless all seemed to know one other, so once Yoshio had found someone who knew the poet, he was able to get some information through the grapevine. One person had seen him in Ebisu; someone else, in Nakano. But he must be moving around, since he was not in either place now.

It was ridiculous. Even if he managed to track him down, he wasn't planning to bring charges against him. Yoshio sighed. All he wanted to do was confront the guy and tell him: "Don't use my magazine article for your sordid ends!"—or something like that. Then a load would drop off his shoulders and he'd be able to relax.

It had all started out with the question of whether cigarettes had been put out properly. Why had it escalated like this? Ever since he was a child, he'd had an overdeveloped sense of responsibility. But at the same time, he was timid and overly sensitive too. When he was class representative on the school trip, he'd call roll so many times that everyone had gotten sick of his officiousness. He was desperately afraid of failure.

Yoshio received a report of a sighting in a park by the west exit of Ikebukuro Station.

He rushed over at top speed, to find that the homeless poet had opened a little shop in the corner of the park. "Got you now!" he muttered triumphantly. The fellow must still be selling his postcards to schoolgirls.

"Hey, you!" said Yoshio. "I've been looking for you."

The man paled visibly and shrank back.

"Don't you use my magazine article for your sordid—!"

The man ran off before he could finish. *You've got the wrong idea about me*, Yoshio thought angrily as he dashed off behind him. The poet soon tripped over his own feet and crashed to the ground.

"There's no need to run away." Yoshio grabbed his arm and pulled him up to his feet. "Look, I'm not going to drag you off to the police or anything like that. That's not the sort of—"

He felt a blow to his chin. *The bastard had punched him!* His whole face grew hot with rage.

The man was running out of the park as fast as his legs would carry him. Yoshio gave chase. He wasn't interested in warning him anymore. He was going to damn well kick the shit out of the guy.

He ran after him, through the streets of Ikebukuro. It was just like a cops-and-robbers show on TV. The poet crashed into a delivery bike. Its cargo of hot noodles flew upward and landed on Yoshio's head. That only made him even angrier. He swore he'd catch the bastard if it was the last thing he did.

He caught up with him on a street corner and tackled him. *It'll hurt when I hit the pavement*, he thought absentmindedly, but his body went ahead and acted on its own.

The poet pitched headfirst onto the asphalt. Little plastic bags flew out of his jacket pocket and littered the road. They were full of white powder.

"Street Poet a Drug Peddler!"

"Journalist to Pervy Poet: Don't Use My Articles as Bait!"

It was too much trouble to explain the whole sequence of events, so Yoshio let the media go ahead and write whatever they wanted. As a result, he suddenly found himself being feted as a hero. When he shrank from the publicity, his reputation as a "modest young man" only grew. Offers of work poured in. In some mysterious, roundabout way, his obsessive-compulsive checking disorder seemed to be good for society as a whole.

"Wow, Mr. Iwamura! You've become a real celebrity!" Irabu was as happy as if he were the one in the limelight. "With you in fighting form like this, I think we should do a bit more action therapy."

"No, thanks." He was still coming to the hospital regularly. He had lost count of the number of injections he'd received.

"Well, at the very least you've learned to think positively about yourself. It's thanks to careful people—people who worry—that the world is kept safe."

"But if we have to look after everything ourselves, that's just not fair."

"Right," said Irabu, pouting. "Well, we'd better go do the wheels of that Mercedes."

"I don't see the connection."

"Somebody will look after things. It's none of your business. Forget about it. Let other people do the worrying. Let's say you're on the bus. Loads of passengers are going to get off at the next stop—let's say it's a train station, or a huge housing complex. In a situation like that, you don't need to press the buzzer to ask the driver to stop; somebody else will. It's all right. Somebody will always press it. You're not the only one who doesn't want to overshoot your stop."

He was so right. Yoshio always took it upon himself to press the buzzer.

"And with the hospital director's Mercedes, all we're trying to do is make him worry a little bit, right?"

This was a leap of logic that Yoshio couldn't follow. Was Irabu a genius or a fool?

"Oh, well. Maybe I'll just have to do it myself," Irabu said, laughing.

Yoshio chatted with Irabu until evening, when he left the hospital. He was hungry, so he had the dinner special at a cheap local restaurant before strolling to the station.

He found himself beside the wall of the hospital where he had gone with Irabu a few days earlier. At the far end of the street, he saw Irabu, wearing his white coat, leaving the grounds of the hospital. And he was carrying tools.

Tools? While Yoshio was still wondering whether to say hello, Irabu had sprung into his Porsche. The engine gave a deep-throated roar, the lights went on and the car flashed by.

Had he really done it?

Surely not! Yoshio stood rooted to the spot. Had Irabu really loosened the bolts on the tires? That was a serious offense. It'd be "grievous bodily harm" if the director should have an accident.

He couldn't just overlook it. No, for Irabu's sake, he couldn't. He went up the gate and peered inside. Visiting time was over, and he wasn't wearing a white coat, so he couldn't just saunter in.

It was precisely at that moment that the Mercedes rolled out of the gate. An old man was at the wheel.

Oh my God! Oh my God! His knees were trembling. He had to stop that car. There was a chance somebody could be killed.

Yoshio sprinted after the car. He caught it as it sat at a traffic light, and rapped on the window. The old man looked out at him with a startled expression on his face.

"Please, open this window! I'm not crazy!" His voice was urgent.

The old man did not open the window. He looked terrified and stared straight ahead. As soon as the lights went green the car shot forward.

Oh no! The director had gotten the wrong idea.

Yoshio kept on running after him. They were in the middle of town, so there were plenty of traffic lights. The car shouldn't be able to get up that much speed.

But why should he always end up having to do things like this? Irabu had told him to "let other people do the worrying." Well, clearly he was one of those "other people."

He'd do whatever it took to stop the car. He started to shout. Pointing at the car, he yelled at the top of his lungs, "Somebody stop that Mercedes!"

Maybe the hospital director had panicked and spun the steering wheel the wrong way, but the Mercedes rammed straight into a telephone pole. Smoke started pouring from the radiator, and the hood sprang open. Passersby crowded around.

Yoshio came up. He glanced into the trunk. It was jam-packed with syringes wrapped in see-through rubbish bags. The director was in a state of shock in the front seat.

"Hospital Director Charged with Illegal Disposal of Syringes: Medical Ethics in the Spotlight"

"Investigative Reporter Yoshio 'Pit Bull' Iwamura Sinks His Teeth into a Story and Won't Let Go"

What an extraordinary world it was! You had a fixed role to play, and you could never change it. There were people who were the cause of anxiety in others, and there were people who got all worked up about things even though no one had asked them to.

"Oh no," Irabu had assured him. "I'd never loosen the bolts on his wheels." Yoshio did not know whether to believe him or not. "I turned off the hospital water at the main. The patients' poo-poo is trapped on the premises!"

Yoshio didn't know how to reply to that.

"Being a serious reporter is a vocation," said Irabu, chuckling and settling himself deep in his armchair. "It's not a job that an easygoing, optimistic sort of person is able to do."

Events seemed to have shown that, all right.

Likewise, Irabu had a vocation as a psychiatrist. In his case though, it was because his character stopped people from taking themselves too seriously.

"Doctor," said Yoshio, "I've moved into a boardinghouse—meals included—in Hongo."

He wasn't able to shake his concern about fires, so as a last resort he'd moved to a boardinghouse. It was, he knew, a bit bizarre for a thirty-year-old man to be living in a place like that, but it suited him.

"Sounds nice—like a student," said Irabu enviously. "I'll stop by for a drink sometime soon."

"Sure, that'd be good," Yoshio said.

Irabu flashed him a grin.

A place of refuge is a good thing for anyone to have. These days Yoshio was feeling a little more at peace with the world.

Hideo Okuda was an advertising copywriter and a magazine editor before starting to write at the age of thirty-four. He sees manga comics as the main inspiration for his work, and has said that his first concern as an author is to "give readers a good time." His work, which includes a novel and several short-story collections, has won some of Japan's most prestigious literary awards, including the Naoki Prize in 2004. *In the Pool* has been made into a major Japanese motion picture.

Jacket photograph by Greg Fanslow.
Jacket design by Linda Ronan.

"Our neurologist here is a little bit eccentric, but don't worry, you'll soon get used to him."

HE KNOCKED ON THE DOOR. From within, a cheery voice sang out, "Hello, hello! Come right in!" It was just like the greeting you get when checking into a traditional country inn. Yoshio pushed open the door and went into the consultation room. A pale, fat, middle-aged man smiled broadly and greeted him from an armchair.

"How about trying our luck with a nice little injection for starters, eh?" He spread his hands wide and raised his bulk ever so slightly off the chair.

"Huh?" Yoshio's head jerked back in surprise. He frowned.

"The jokers upstairs aren't sending anybody down to see me these days. Don't think we've given anyone an injection for a good two weeks now." The fat doctor was getting himself worked up. "Those internal medicine fellows are so inconsiderate. I keep telling them to treat all colds and flu as psychosomatic, but—"

Yoshio was flabbergasted. Who was this man? A badge on his white coat said, "ICHIRO IRABU, DOCTOR OF NEUROLOGY."

"Mayumi, love, why don't we go for a deep vein job today? Use the fattest needle in the shed."

In response to his voice, a young and almost unfeasibly sexy nurse emerged from behind a screen. . . .

—FROM "DOUBLE CHECK"

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